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THE MAN FROM MAINE CALMLY SAT UPON THE PROSTRATE DENVERITE, MOPPING HIS FACE WITH THE RED BANDANNA.

ub dot viddle acain. Kar-yoop! Dot vas der stoof!"

Dutch Karl had been indulging freely in liquid refreshments from his own bar, and was getting slightly hilarious as the fun waxed faster and more furious. He was giving an "opening," having just moved into the new "Palace Saloon," his former establishment being destroyed by fire a few days before.

The fire caused the ghrewd saloonkeeper to lose very little business. He had made money in Early Bird Bar, and he did not propose to be knocked out so easily, therefore he secured a canvas covering, and improvised a bar with the aid of a plank and two empty whisky barrels. Behind this rude bar he placed a fresh barrel of liquor on tap, and he kept right on attending to business while the new Palace Saloon was being erected on the site of the old building.

Despite its name, the saloon was anything but a palace, having been hastily thrown together. It was composed of rough, unplanned boards, with the exception of a certain portion of the floor that was intended for dancing purposes.

On moving into the new "Palace," Dutch Karl secured the service of a negro violinist and had what he called an "opening." All the sports of Early Bird Bar were on hand to take part in the exercises, and things moved with a great deal of swiftness from the very start.

During the evening many of the prominent citizens of the town dropped in to look on and pass a word of banter with the jolly Dutchman, who greeted every one cordially and did his level best to induce the visitors to drink as much of the bad liquor as they could comfortably pay for.

"Peesness vas peesness," he would say. "All der same, v'en a man can gombine peesness mid bleasure, he vassome pig vol eef he don't do dot. I haf some bleasure here dis nighd v'at don'd gost noddings to mein gustomers. Eferybody v'at tages some trinks at dot par haf der privilege uf tancing mit der pest looking vee-males v'at he can vind to tance mit him. Yaw, dot vas so."

But, females were scarce in Early Bird, and although nearly every one of which the town could boast was present at the opening, there were not enough to go round. This compelled some of the hilarious dancers to go it "stag fashion," and it was not an unusual sight to see half-a-dozen couples on the floor, none of whom wore petticoats.

Some of those couples were oddly mated. For instance, Sassafras Jack, six feet tall and built like a living skeleton, went whirling over the floor with Hogshead Harkins clasped in his embrace. Harkins was about five feet tall and weighed two hundred and fifty, if a pound. He was no fairy, but the "ardent" he had absorbed seemed to make him feel very light and airy.

Hunk Riley of Denver, the worst fire-eater and bully in that section, had dragged Peaceful Pil, the coward of the camp, onto the floor and was spinning the poor fellow around till he was dizzy and nearly frightened out of his senses.

Some of the women had evidently been indulging in "corn cologne," for they enjoyed the capers of the company, when the "best" as well as the worst society of Early Bird Bar was represented.

Major Selban Hunter dropped in during the evening, and he split a brand new pair of gloves cheering Chipper Kate, that "lady" having knocked the glossy silk hat from the head of Easy Ned Lester, the champion poker sharp of Early Bird.

Ned scowled a bit as he picked up his hat, at the same time restoring to a convenient pocket the self-acting revolver that had leaped like a flash to his hand. Had the offender been of the masculine gender, he would have stood an excellent chance of digesting a bullet from that same revolver, for the card-sharp was "Old Electricity" when it came to shooting.

Ned's scowl soon changed to a smile, and he laughed with the others, knowing that it was the most graceful thing to do, under the circumstances.

Easy Ned was a handsome fellow, after a fashion—almost as handsome as Dapper Davy, his most formidable rival for sporting honors in Early Bird Bar. Not that there were not enough others who took a chance on anything doubtful whenever there was hope of making or losing a dollar by doing so; but, Ned and Davy were at the head among that class. In fact, there was a rivalry between them, although up to date it had not culminated in open warfare. Still it was universally known that the two did not love each other overly much, and it would have surprised no one had the rivalry brought

about at short notice a "shoot-on-sight" condition of things.

Easy Ned was a tall, well-built, brown-bearded fellow, with the air and bearing of a society swell. He had the appearance of belonging to some athletic society and being an active member. He had the reputation of being quick as a cat and a hard man to down.

Dapper Davy presented quite a contrast to the Apollo-like sport, being below medium height and having the gentle voice and retiring manner of a bashful boy. This was Davy in his natural condition. Sometimes he indulged in stimulating drinks, and then he became changed from his usual self. He would enter into the wildest carousals and be the leader of any daring or reckless deed. In fact, it was said that when Davy began to drink a devil began to show in his eyes. He was a dangerous person to cross when in that condition, as two graves in Early Bird's cemetery could attest. Both were "bad men," but they who "chipped in" made the mistake of their lives when they tried to crowd the curly-haired sport.

Yes, Davy's hair was curly, and it was as black as the raven's wing. His eyes were also black and piercing. Those eyes had made many a man quail.

Davy's hands were always concealed by kid gloves. It seemed strange he should constantly wear those gloves, but not a person in Early Bird remembered seeing them removed. Nobody ventured to question him concerning this little "fad" of his, and Davy volunteered no information on the point, so the curiously-inclined citizens were left to their speculations.

Davy had been drinking a little on this night of the "opening," and sat on an empty barrel, keenly watching everything that was going on, while his gloved fingers carelessly caressed his delicate mustache and goatee. Mild and inoffensive he looked, but those who knew him best discerned that lurking devil was in his eyes, and so advised their friends to steer clear of Davy, for the time being.

Major Selban Hunter was the magnate of Early Bird and the owner of the Gloriana Mine, of which Eben Sutton was at one time foreman. Sutton had been discharged for reasons best known to the major and his place filled by a younger man, Harold Dustan.

Having indulged freely in "benzine," Sutton was watching for Dustan to appear at the saloon, declaring that he would "lick him tell he can't see." The ex-foreman's eyes lighted up with rage as they fell on the comfortably corpulent figure of his former employer, the major having dropped into the new saloon in time to witness Chipper Kate's assault on the hat.

"Why didn't he brung round that new pup of his!" growled Eben, his fingers working nervously. "I'd jest like ter pound old Hunter's head, but it'd be all my life's w'u'th. He owns most of ther men in this town nigh body an' soul. I dunno jest why they bow down ter him an' reverence him in sech a way. It's suthin' I never c'u'd understan'."

"Ef Dustan does durst show his nose hyer ter-night I'll break it fer him! That is biz. He hain't no right ter rob me of my job, an' he's nuthin' but a tenderfut anyhow. I can't understan' why ther major sh'u'd fire a good man ter guv his placeter a greeny."

So Sutton skulked in a dark corner, and muttered and growled to himself, while he watched for the new foreman.

There was another, as well as Sutton, whose eyes lighted up with hatred when they rested on the solid figure of the major. This other was known around Early Bird as Injun Jim. He was a half-blood, and seemed a sort of outcast. No one knew anything real damaging about Jim, except that he was part Indian; but, that was quite enough. He was condemned.

It is the simple truth that Early Bird Bar was a hard town; but for all that it tried to keep up a semblance of law and order. Murder was considered a crime of high degree, although not always punishable with death. Self-defense was a plea that carried a great deal of weight with the dispensers of "justice," in that town.

Like Sutton, Injun Jim muttered to himself in a remote corner, his eyes fastened vengefully on the major.

"Good feed make much fat," softly grunted the half-blood. "But Jim know you, just the same. He waits his time, and then—he will strike! The blood of the White Rose calls for vengeance, and the Black Wolf shall die! The time is not very far away. I will know how the Wolf fattens on the feed he finds in a deserted hole, and then I will leave him dead! Another moon will see the end of the trail."

The magnate of Early Bird had, in truth, a deadly foe in the half-blood.

Major Hunter laughed indulgently at the antics of the mob of dancers and passed a little banter with Dutch Karl, as he dallied over the drink he had ordered.

Meantime, a stranger in Early Bird drifted in at the door of the saloon and paused to stare at the scene of revelry in open-mouth astonishment.

A tenderfoot!

Yes, and a greenhorn of the most pronounced type. He appeared to be a Down-Easter—a Yankee with plenty of hayseed in his long tow-colored hair. He was dressed in clothes that fitted him in a most outrageous fashion, or properly, did not fit him at all. He was of medium height, and his face was ruddy from exposure, while from beneath his chin grew a mass of beard slightly darker than his hair. In one hand he carried a carpet-bag, in the other an umbrella of ample dimensions. From the side-pocket of his coat dangled a red bandanna handkerchief.

Planting his feet some distance apart, yet toying in in a most pronounced manner, he stared at the dancers for several moments, and then, with a combination of drawl and stammer, he exclaimed:

"Waul, by th-th-th-thut'rashun! this jest nacherilly does bub-bub-bub-beat all nater! Fu'st ole-fashioned kitchen dance I've seen sence I left ole Maine! This kinder rousts me up, an' I guess I'll have ter sus-sus-sus-shake a hoof myself. Wonder where I kin fuf-fuf-find a pup-pup-partner?"

CHAPTER II.

A TENDERFOOT IN TROUBLE.

"I'm your blushing tulip! Just gaze on me and let your heart flutter two or three fluts! I'm the gentle and gazelle-like damsel thet's goin' ter make ye so hilariously happy you'll ketch another kink in your tongue w'en you tries ter talk. I'm the delicate maid who will accompany you through the giddy mazes of the graceful waltz. Come on, my gentle hayseed—come on!"

The speaker was a big, round-shouldered, evil-appearing tough who had overheard the stut-terer's soliloquy. It was Hunk Riley of Denver, the most aggressive bully in Early Bird. Riley had made his name a terror during the short time he had resided in the little camp, and peaceably-inclined citizens were pretty careful to keep out of his way.

Almost as soon as the tenderfoot entered the door, the big ruffian had "spotted" him, and determined to have some "fun" at the greenhorn's expense.

Straightway Riley meandered in the new-comer's direction, arriving just in time to hear the stranger's muttered words. Riley was not a bashful or backward individual, and he immediately offered himself as a partner for the waltz.

The new-comer was astonished. His surprise was written all over his countenance, as he surveyed the Man from Denver thoroughly as far as outward appearance was concerned.

"Hey?"

It was plain he did not fully comprehend the words of the round-shouldered tough. His under jaw dropped and he stood staring, his face expressing nothing but utter blankness.

Hunk Riley laughed.

It was not a pleasant or musical laugh; it was hoarse and discordant as the croak of a raven.

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the big tough, thus attracting attention in that direction. "Waal, this is about the jim-diddiest jay-jay I ever sot my eyes on! Say, pard, whar be ye frum, an' w'at wuz ye ever born fer?"

"I'm frum Maine—the Pup-pup-pup-pine Tree State. Mebbe yeou never heard of ther place! I dunno as I know whut I was born fer, 'less it was ter answer fool questions asked by sus-sus-such fellers as yeou be."

It was Riley's turn to be astonished, and he rapidly grew angry, for a suspicious sound came from several persons who heard the greenhorn's reply. The sound was like a repressed snicker, and that was enough to thoroughly start the Denver tough.

With one long stride Hunk went forward till he could grasp the tenderfoot's shoulder, fastening an iron grip on the shrinking stranger.

"Waal, you're gol-derned peert! Wot d'yer mean by sassin' me?"

The tenderfoot trembled.

"Sus-sus-say," he stammered; "I never sassid you—never dud-dud-dud-doneit! Ouch! Leggo my sus-sus-shoulder! Yeou hurt like th-th-thunder!"

"Shake him him out, Hunk!" piped Sawed-off Simp, staggering forward. "Shake ther p'izen critter out of his hide! Jest lemme tend ter his case."

Simp—whose proper name was Simpson—squared off at the tenderfoot and delivered a blow straight at the face of the Man from Maine.

But, the stranger did not stand to receive it. He dodged with remarkable swiftness, at the same time rapping Simp sharply over the knuckles with the old umbrella.

The short rascal gave a howl of pain, and "went for" the tenderfoot again.

With a swinging left-hand blow, Hunk Riley promptly knocked Simp down, and then he gave the intoxicated tough a kick that sent him sliding among the legs of the spectators, where he lay, groaning dismally.

"I don't 'low no critter ter putt his spoon inter my soup," calmly observed Riley. "Some of Simp's pards better fish him out an' take him whar they kin soke his head. I'm runnin' this end of ther show arter my own fashion. This boy didn't come in hyer ter be swiped by any derned little runt of that caliber."

"Tut-tut-tut-thankie, mister?" chattered the apparently terrified tenderfoot: "I'm much obleeged—Ireely an! I did think, b'gosh! he was goin' ter baste me ag'in. I hain't no fuf-fuf-fuf-fighter an' I don't want ter git inter a raow. W'en I left hum, mum-mum-marm says ter me, sez she: 'Sus-sus-Sile, yoo're gug-gug-goin' aout inter a desprit kentry 'mongst Injuns an' bub-bub-b'ars an' snaiks an' all manner of critters. You'll be certun ter cuc-cuc-come back dead,' she sez, sez she."

"Naow I'm a pup-pup-peaceful sort of fellow, an' I don't keer 'bout havin' marm's words come trew. If folks 'll let me 'lone, I won't bother them much, but if wu'st comes to wu'st, I'm gug-gug-goin' ter hoe my own row, sure's my name's Sile Stebbins."

The manner in which the words were spoken was far more laughable than the words themselves, and a burst of merriment came from the throng of spectators gathered around Hunk Riley and his capture.

"W'at do you call it, Hunk?"

"Whar did it grow?"

"Oh, looker ther Rubel!"

"Mamma's boy!"

"Whiskers, five a bag!"

"Zz-z-z-z-z!"

The final imitation of the wind whistling through the greenhorn's yellow whiskers raised another laugh. The pilgrim from Maine seemed at a loss to understand the cause of all the merriment, for the look on his face grew still blanker, if possible. He looked anxiously toward the door, and, but for Hunk's detaining hand, he might have made a desperate bolt for the open air.

"Gentleman, gentlemen!" cried Riley, with pretended dignity, "fall back! Don't crowd too close! It's dangerous w'en it's started, an' some of ye might git hurt. Look out fer its heels! This, ladies an' gents, is ther only an' 'riginal biranger-hoodud. It was roped in ther desert heart of Afriky, an' has been exhibited before all ther crowned heads of Yarrup. It is a great livin' natteral feenomernon, ther like of which has never afore fell under ther notiss of ther civilized nashuns."

Of a sudden, Sile Stebbins seemed to comprehend that he was being made sport of, and it started his temper.

"Lul-lul-look here!" he cried, wildly flourishing his umbrella and carpet-bag; "I didn't cum here ter be picked on, an' don't ye fergit it! I ain't got no fuf-fuf-friends in this taown, but that won't make a tarnal bit of difference. I'll die fightin' like a mum-mum-man!"

But this outburst only aroused the risibilities of the crowd to a still greater extent.

"There, there!" came soothingly from Riley's lips. "Don't get excited, pard! It's all right. These yere people don't mean anythin'. You said you wanted ter dance, so come on an' we'll hoe her down."

"Bub-bub-but I want to dance with a lady."

"Well, you won't git the chance, fer thar hain't ernough ter go round. There goes ther fiddle. Come on!"

Without more ado, Riley dragged the unwilling tenderfoot on the planned floor reserved for the dancers. Sile still held fast to his carpet-bag and umbrella, and he made one or two desperate attempts to break from the Denver tough; but he was not successful, and Riley was soon whirling the stranger over the floor. The spectators looked on with amusement.

At first Riley lifted the greenhorn so his feet

"only touched the ground at high places," and the Yankee's legs waved wildly in the air. In holding tight the umbrella and carpet-bag, he managed to hit nearly every person on the floor with them, giving Sassafra Jack a dig into the stomach that doubled the skeleton up like a jack-knife.

It was but a very brief time before the dancers began to flee before the approach of Riley and his partner, as if the two carried a pestilence, and it was not long before they had the entire floor to themselves.

"Hold on here, b'gosh!" yelled the Down-Easter, making desperate struggles to break from Riley's grasp. "I'm dum-swizzled if I'm goin' tew stand this! I like fun as well's ther next feller, but I'm gaul-danged if this hain't too much!"

The spectators were laughing at the sport, Major Hunter seeming to enjoy it as well as the others. Easy Ned Lester seemed the only one who did not perceive any sport in the affair, for his face was grave and unmoved by mirth.

At length, in some manner, Sile Stebbins managed to twist his legs in with Riley's so that worthy went crashing to the floor, the Yankee being uppermost.

The big tough was slightly stunned and, before he could fully comprehend what had happened, the man from Maine calmly sat upon the prostrate Denverite, mopping his face with the red bandanna.

"Th-th-tt-thut'rashun!" he stammered. "I didn't s'pose I was gug-gug-goin' ter run inter anything of this kind, though marm she tole me I'd see strange sights. This raised a reg'ler sweat, b'gosh!"

Hunk Riley attempted to sit up.

"W'at in blazes yer doin' yere?" he demanded. "Takin' me fer a stuffed chair, ur suthin' of that sort? Geet up!"

"Whoa, Jinuwarry!" half-laughed Stuttering Sile. "Don't go ter buckin' a feller off an' breakin' his neck. Stiddy, yeou onruly beast!"

The Man from Denver gave a howl of astonishment and rage.

"I be blowed ef ther varmint hain't takin' me fer a broncho!" he yelled, rearing up, to be promptly thrust back by the Yankee's hand.

"Easy, I tell ye!" commanded Sile. "Yeou've had piles of fun aout of me, an' naow it's my tut-tut-turn."

The spectators were inclined to express their approval of this, although many of them expected to see Hunk Riley add another victim to his already long list.

Of a sudden, Riley whirled over and scrambled to his feet, but the Yankee was up first, standing with a broad grin on his ruddy, good-natured face.

"Sus-sus-sus-say," he stuttered, addressing Riley, as that worthy gained a perpendicular, "I kinder guess it's yeour treat, by thutter!"

"Treat! Howlin' Injuns! I'll treat yer ter this!"

With that, Riley jerked out a wicked-looking knife and flourished it before the tenderfoot's face, causing Sile to stagger backward, uttering a cry of dismay.

"Oh, sus-sus-say!" he gurgled. "Do be keerful with that thing! Yeou'll cut somebody yit!"

"I'll cut yer heart out!" ranted the now thoroughly enraged bully. "Take me fer a boss! Waugh! Say yer pra'rs, tenderfoot, fer I'm goin' ter carve yer."

"Yeou don't mean it?"

"Wa-al, I jest do!"

At this moment, Easy Ned stepped forward.

"Give the greenhorn a show, Riley," he advised, quietly. "You ought to be willing to do that."

"I've got a record ter sustain," was the retort; "so I'm goin' ter carve him."

"I wouldn't." The words came calmly from the lips of the brown-bearded sport, and he carelessly dropped his hands into the side-pockets of his coat.

Riley knew what that movement meant.

"Look hyer," he snarled. "Be you goin' ter shove yerself inter this yere row?"

"I don't perceive any row."

"W'at d'yer call it?"

"An imposition on good nature. But, it's none of my funeral so long as you give this greeny fair play. Just the same, I don't mean to sit around and see you do him up with the knife. A square deal has always been my motto."

"But ther onery cuss tried ter ride me fer a broncho!"

"After you had enjoyed yourself at his expense."

"He's got ter fight!"

"Then give him a square chance. Put up your knife and fight him with your fists."

"Great gug-gug-gosh!" stammered Sile, looking frightened. "I can't fight that feller! He kin lick me! I don't want to fight, anyhow! I want ter git aout doors!"

He tried to back away, but the friends of Hunk Riley prevented his escape. Sawed-off Simp, whom the Denverite had knocked down a few minutes before, planted himself in Sile's path, crying:

"You don't git out of here, critter! You've gotter fight Riley, ur we'll lynch yer! Hooray fer Hunk, ther chief of Early Bird!"

"Bub-bub-bub-but I cuc-cuc-cuc-can't fuf-fuf-fuf-fight!" blubbered the greenhorn. "It's ag'in my pup-pup-principles! I pup-promised mum-mum-marm I wouldn't fight!"

Easy Ned gave the stammerer a look of mingled pity and contempt.

"Stand up and take your medicine like a man!" he advised. "If you can't fight your way, you have no business on earth!"

"Oh, gug-gug-great Jehossiphat!" wailed the tenderfoot! "I dew wish I'd never left Maine! I'm afraid I'll be dead when I sus-sus-see the old State ag'in!"

CHAPTER III.

DAPPER DAVY PULLS TRIGGER.

STUTTERING SILE seemed utterly unconscious that he had made a genuine Irish "bull," at which not a few were laughing, and there seemed very little make-believe in the fear and alarm he exhibited.

Hunk Riley laughed, as he put up his knife.

"I'll jest eternally knock ther hay out of ther critter," chuckled the half-intoxicated tough, rolling up his sleeves and expectorating on his hands. "To be course, I hate ter take this yere kind of a chicken fer knockin', but I hev ter do it arter w'at's passed."

"To be course!" chorused the ruffian's pards.

"I hain't fit sence the last time I got licked at skule!" groaned the greenhorn. "It hain't no use fer me ter try. Say, I'll do anything ruther then hev trouble."

"Oh, you can't squawk!" chuckled the Man from Denver. "It hain't nary bit o' use ter squirm!"

Easy Ned had fallen back into the crowd, but, at this juncture, another person advanced to the stammerer's side.

It was Harold Dustan, foreman of the Gloriana Mine, a young man with a pleasant face and steady eye. Dustan was a tenderfoot, and to more than one it was a wonder that Major Hunter had engaged him as foreman.

"Look here," spoke out Harold, his manner being bold and easy; "I am free to confess I do not like this business at all. It does not seem right that this unfortunate fellow, who is plainly of peaceable nature, should be jumped on by the acknowledged 'bad man' of Early Bird."

Riley gave a whoop of amazement.

"Wha-ut!" he bellowed. "Do you durst putt in your nose, critter? Why, you hain't northin' but a greeny! Ef it wur'n't fer yer bein' in ther major's employ, I'd—I'd—"

"What would you do?" coolly asked the young foreman, as he quietly faced the bully.

The Man from Denver flourished his fists in the air, but could only gasp:

"I'd knock yer derned head off, but I hain't buttin' 'gainst ther major, so—"

"I'll hev ter do ther knockin'!" roared the voice of Eben Sutton, the foreman who had been displaced by Hunter, and, as we have seen, held a grudge against the man who had filled the vacancy. "I've jest bin waitin' fer you!"

Then he came lunging toward Dustan, somewhat blinded by passion and the liquor he had imbibed.

"Holt on! holt on!" yelled the voice of Dutch Karl. "Von fight at a dime is apoud enough in dis skagoon! Holt up your hosses a leedle pit! Shimminy dunder! who vas runnin' dis blace no-how?"

He attempted to force his way to the center, but somebody tripped him up, and he fell to the floor with a shock that shook the saloon.

Dapper Davy was now standing on the head of a barrel which had served him as a seat a short time before, and, although his manner was cool and unconcerned, the glitter in his eyes told of the fire within. That fire was smoldering, but a breath would cause it to burst forth in fury. The liquor he had swallowed flung a flaming flush into his cheeks, and those who knew him well regarded this as a danger signal.

Major Hunter had mounted to the top of the bar, from which point he could witness all that occurred, and, although he was a bit startled by the appearance of Dustan, he made no move to

interfere. He was not a man to needlessly thrust himself into brawls, but when he did take a hand, his play counted. If his foreman saw fit to get into a row and stop a bullet, so much the worse for Dustan. Another man would fill the place, if it was made vacant.

Harold Dustan turned to meet the assault of the enraged Sutton just in time to parry a savage blow. Sutton was a powerful fellow, but he knew nothing of scientific fighting, depending entirely on brute strength.

On the other hand, Dustan had been an amateur boxer of no little repute. Still, he knew he would be in a bad fix if too closely hemmed in or hampered in his movements by the throng.

The young foreman had been warned concerning Sutton's anger, and so he knew just what was meant by the sudden assault.

"Give us room!" he cried, leaping to one side. "Don't crowd!"

He knew he must fight, and he was ready to do so, if he had a fair show.

Easy Ned promptly stepped in once more, and swept the throng back with his long, strong arms.

"Give 'em a show!" he commanded. "You can see the fun all the better if you get back. Make room!"

Hunk Riley now uttered his war-cry.

"Whoop!" he roared. "This here's a double bill—two scrubs in one ring! Look out, greeny! I'm goin' ter knock ther hayseed out of yer!"

Then he lunged at Stuttering Sile.

There was a sudden *spat*, and the Yankee went down with a flop. It seemed as if Riley had knocked him off his feet, but the "chief" knew his clinched fist had encountered nothing but empty air. The tenderfoot had made the spitting sound by striking his hands together at the very instant he fell.

Up flew Stuttering Sile's feet, and, hurled forward by the force of his own unresisted blow, Riley landed on the Yankee's boots, which struck the bully fairly in the pit of the stomach. Then the stammerer gave a kick that sent the heavy body of the Man from Denver into the air, causing it to turn almost completely over, so Hunk came down upon the floor fairly on the flat of his back.

He was stunned for an instant.

"Gug-gug-gug-great gosh!" gurgled the greenhorn, sitting up and looking around in evident wonder. "Wh-wh-wh-what's happened?"

He could have answered the question much better than the astounded spectators, for but a few of them understood how the trick had been worked. It was done so swiftly and neatly it had the appearance of having been thoroughly rehearsed beforehand.

Meantime, Dustan had again met a rush made by the discharged foreman of the Gloriana, and been able to give Sutton a blow that staggered him.

"Cuss yer!" gritted Eben, his eyes glowing redly as he ground his yellow teeth together. "I'd like ter git my han's on yer woozle! I'd—"

He reached out his arms, his horny fingers working convulsively, as he sought to get a grip on the new foreman.

Harold knew it would be folly to try to reason with Sutton, so he did not hesitate in taking advantage of an opportunity to plant another telling blow.

Blinded, more furious than ever, Eben recovered himself in a measure and again hurled himself at the young man, striking savagely at Harold's grave face.

The young foreman ducked and dodged, entirely escaping injury, but giving Sutton a crack on the jaw that knocked the infuriated man off his feet. Then he quietly waited for the miner to arise.

"Th-th-thutterashun!" came from Stuttering Sile's lips. "I jest wish I could fight like that!" "Look out for Riley!" yelled somebody in the crowd.

The bully had struggled to his feet and was making for the Yankee. Sile cast a frightened look over his shoulder and then dodged around behind Eben Sutton, who was just getting up.

Swiftly catching the former foreman of the Gloriana by the collar and the seat of his pantaloons, the queer tenderfoot lifted the man bodily and hurled him straight at Hunk Riley. Sutton's head struck Riley in the stomach, and both men went crashing to the floor, while a shout of combined merriment and wonder burst from the spectators.

"I want to go hum ter my marm!" wailed Sile, in apparent terror, as he stared at the result of his surprising feat of strength. "I don't know haow ter fuf-fuf-fuf-fight!"

"Well, you are learning mighty fast!" suspiciously retorted Easy Ned, who was regarding the Yankee closely. "Keep right on as you have begun, and you will come out top of the heap."

"But, neither Sile nor Harold were 'in it,' after this. Both Riley and Sutton were so infuriated that they entirely lost their heads, speaking figuratively, of course, and began to punch each other in a most unmerciful manner.

The spectators fully appreciated the ridiculous side of the affair, and now literally roared with laughter.

"Looker ther blamed fools!" screamed one hilarious fellow, climbing on the shoulders of a comrade. "They hain't ther least derved ijee w'at in blazes they're doin'."

"Hoe in, Riley!"

"Baste him, Sutton!"

"I'll bet on the best man!"

"Holy Moses! hain't this a picnic!"

"Gug-gug-gug-goshfry!" gurgled Stuttering Sile, edging toward Harold Dustan. "This ere beats my time all holier! I'll agree I don't jest understand whut hes happened. Hev you an' I got ter fight it aout, mister?"

"I hardly think so," smiled the young foreman, who was not a little surprised by the way things were turning. "We are out of the affair. All we have to do is stand back and let those two blooming ninnies pommel each other till they get sick of it."

"Wal, if this is whut you call fightin' aout in this part of the kentry, I'll go inter ther business. I thought a man'd got ter git up an' show haow he war built. I dunno what marm'll say when she hears haow I've been inter a raow. I hain't much ter lul-lul-lul-look at; but I kinder guess all ther saime I hain't such a gaul-dern sus-sus-slouch arter all."

For all the fact that Riley had held the reputation of being the "chief of Early Bird," he found his equal in Sutton. The men had been drinking enough to dull their wits, and, after getting fairly started, neither had a thought of pausing until one of them was whipped.

"By dunder!" howled the Dutch saloonkeeper. "Dot peesness vas goin' to stob right away queek! I'd spoils all mein trate ad der par."

"Let em' have it out, Dutchy," cried one of the throng; "then we'll drink your old saloon dry."

With a few exceptions, the attention of nearly every one seemed drawn toward the fighters. One of the exceptions was Major Hunter. There was a scowl on the magnate's face. He was closely watching Stuttering Sile, who stood beside Harold Dustan, pulling at his corn-colored whiskers and grinning serenely.

Dapper Davy was also watching the tenderfoot, the fire in his eyes fiercer than ever, and his right hand resting near the revolver on his hip.

Easy Ned had fallen back into the throng; but he, also, seemed to take a singular interest in the Yankee.

Riley and Sutton fought until both sunk to the floor, battered, bleeding and exhausted, neither proving the victor.

A few words, unheard by the throng, had passed between Stuttering Sile and Harold Dustan. The Yankee secured his carpet-bag and umbrella, and, at the foreman's side, attempted to pass through the crowd.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a pistol rung out, and the Man from Maine fell heavily to the floor.

Dapper Davy stood on the empty barrel, a smoking revolver in his gloved hand and a devilish smile on his flushed face.

CHAPTER IV.

IS HE CAPTAIN BLOOD?

THE action of the little sport created some consternation and amazement in the saloon, although tragic scenes and sudden deaths were not unfamiliar there.

Davy looked around in a cool manner, as if searching for any of the tenderfoot's friends who might feel it their duty to find out the manner in which Silas had been shot down without a show.

"Ther Old Boy's ter pay now!" gasped Hogshead Harkins, as he endeavored to conceal his bulky and cumbersome form behind the skeleton-like figure of Sassafras Jack. "Davy's on a holy howl, an' ther moon'll be decorated with blood directly!"

With a howl of terror, Peaceful Pil made a break for the door, his first thought being to reach the open air and a place of safety far beyond the reach of flying bullets. Stubbing his

toe, he went heavily to the floor, sliding between the feet of Sawed-off Simpson, upsetting that individual in a most effective manner.

Hunk Riley and Eben Sutton were too badly used up to take the least interest in the shooting.

Easy Ned had instantly whirled toward Davy, but he took good care not to let his hands stray toward his weapons, for he knew the little sharp was flash-lightning when it came to shooting and would be only too glad of an excuse to plant a bullet in his rival.

At first Harold Dustan did not seem to comprehend what had happened, for he stared in astonishment at the fallen figure of the Yankee. But, it all seemed to come to him like a flash, and he wheeled to look for the one who had done the shooting, hot anger portrayed on his handsome face.

Dutch Karl shouted out something that was drowned by the chorus of screams that came from the females huddling in a distant part of the saloon.

Major Hunter, like others, seemed astounded by Dapper Davy's sudden and unexpected act, but he still retained his position on the top of the bar.

The most stoical and indifferent person in the room was the half-blood, Injun Jim. Not a sound came from his lips and no change passed over his immobile face, but his black eyes had a strange glitter as they shifted from the figure of Major Hunter to that of Dapper Davy and back again.

"Keep your clothes on, gentlemen!" called the clear and musical voice of the curly-haired sport, as the pressure of a kid-covered finger on the trigger of his smoking revolver caused the hammer to rise a bit. "Don't chip in unless you are ready for a rocky time. It is Davy who did the little trick, and Davy is ready to back his act from start to finish."

"What does this mean, sir?" sternly demanded the magnate of Early Bird, slightly shifting his position on the bar. "This looks like a clean case of—"

"Hold hard, major!" cut in the little gambler, his voice losing much of its music. "Don't drive too fast till you know the road! If you speak too swiftly, you may say some nasty words, and I do not swallow them from any one. All the same, I am not scrubbing around in search of a row with you, for I respect you too highly."

Something like a sneering smile passed over the face of Easy Ned, as he heard his rival's concluding words, and beneath his breath he muttered a single word:

"Taffy!"

But, Davy had made a good play, just the same, as the manner of the major immediately showed.

"That is all very well, sir," he said, somewhat less harshly. "But you must explain your reasons for adding to our already overflowing cemetery. I am afraid the town will have to enlarge the limits of our burying-ground; and already the ledge is cropping out; so it is hard to find dirt enough to cover a respectable corpse."

"That is all right, major," fell easily from the gambler's lips. "If that fellow is planted, it will not be my bullet that placed him toes up to the turf."

"How's that?"

"I simply creased him. If you don't believe it, make an examination."

The fallen man was instantly examined, and a cry of astonishment went up when a wig of false hair was removed from his head. Then it was discovered Davy had told the truth, having sent a bullet so closely to the Yankee's head that Stuttering Sile was stunned, but not killed or even dangerously wounded.

"The critter's in disguise!" shouted some one.

Dapper Davy smiled again.

"I knew it," he declared; "and that's why I dropped him."

"That is scarcely good reason for shooting a man down in such a manner," asserted Major Hunter.

"I had a good reason, sir," affirmed Davy.

"I knew him, for all of his clever disguises."

"Knew him?"

"So I said."

"Who is he?"

"He is Captain Blood, the coiner, toll-collector and cut-throat!"

Barely had this declaration left the dapper sport's lips when a perfect roar arose in that saloon, and it seemed as if a pack of howling imps had been let loose. On every hand the crowd surged forward toward the spot where the wounded man lay, and had not Easy Ned and Harold Dustan fought them back, the

unconscious fellow would have been trampled to death.

"Back, back!" thundered the brown-bearded card-sharp, as he brought the strength of his muscular arms into use. "Go a trifle slow, pards! Get back, I say! The man is down and cannot escape!"

"But, he's Cap'n Blood!" squealed Sassafraz Jack, his head rising above the surging sea of caputs around him. "Let us git at ther critter!"

"He may be Captain Blood," returned Ned; "but that remains to be proven. Get back, or I'll be forced to use my guus!"

Dustan proved himself worthy to stand shoulder to shoulder with a natural athlete like Ned, for he fully did his part in keeping the mob from stamping the life out of Stuttering Sile.

"Py crasush!" howled Dutch Karl, now fully aroused by the row in his place of business. "Dis raget vas got to stob, I pelief! I don't vant some row v'at staves ub eferyding! Shoost ged a leedle more gwied!"

But the saloonkeeper's words would have had little effect on the surging throng had not Major Hunter joined in and urged them to quiet down. Dapper Davy looked as if quite unconcerned by what was happening, but ready to defend himself in an instant, should occasion arise.

"Order, order!" rung out the trumpet-like voice of the magnate, as he thumped his heels on the bar. "Citizens of Early Bird, I am ashamed of you! The man is helpless and in your power. Give him a chance to speak for himself."

"That's all right," laughed Gambler Davy, nodding his curly head. "I don't object to his talking as much as he pleases, but I reckon the boys will lynch him directly he is finished. We have been looking for Captain Blood a long time, and now we have him, I don't reckon we'll give him a chance to play the eel."

"Not much we won't!" shouted more than one of the crowd.

"He cannot get away," assured the major. "And it is only right that he should have an opportunity to disprove—if possible—Davy's charge that he is the outlaw who has caused this and other towns so much trouble. We don't care to make a mistake and lynch the wrong man."

At this Dapper Davy scowled a little.

"I am not in the habit of making mistakes, major," he claimed, rather sharply, his red lips being drawn for an instant over his pearly teeth.

"But there is a possibility—"

"There may be, but I do not think so."

Then Davy deliberately attempted to incite the throng to the point of lynching the helpless man, but Major Hunter's cool words restrained them.

"Give him a show!" urged the magnate. "Surely it is no more than fair. Apply restoratives, and let's hear what he has to say for himself."

But, restoratives were not needed, as Stuttering Sile came around of his own accord and sat up on the floor, looking blankly around him at first and putting a hand to his throbbing head.

"Was it a brick that struck me?" he muttered, the tone of his voice being quite changed and not a sign of hesitation appearing in his speech. "It was something that made me see more stars than a little, and—"

He paused, lowering his hand and discovering the blood upon it. Then he looked at the watching crowd, a queer expression passed like a flash across his face, as he comprehended he had betrayed himself fully in that unguarded moment.

"You are all right, sir," assured Harold Dustan. "That is, you are all right for the present, but I will not vouch for the future."

"What's the row, anyway?" questioned Sile, discovering his false wig on the floor. "I seem to have been scalped. Point out the big chief who lifted my hair, please."

"It has been discovered you are in disguise," explained Harold; "and a serious charge has been made against you."

Easy Ned had fallen into the background, not that there seemed no danger of immediate harm befalling the wounded man; but he was ready to take active part if anything arose to demand such a course.

Sile insisted on being aided to his feet, and then he asked to know the charge against him and who was his accuser. He was told all, and Dapper Davy was pointed out to him.

Immediately he removed the beard from beneath his chin, which betrayed the fact that, like his wig, it was false.

"I do not deny I was in disguise," he calmly said; "and that was for a purpose. But, I do deny being Captain Blood, and defy this villifying card-sharp to prove his charge!"

"That's all right," nodded Davy, although there was a black look on his face. "I reckon you will have to explain why you were disguised before you bring the boys to accept you as on the level, and that is something I fancy you will not be able to do. You are in a tight box, my friend, and your chance of stretching hemp is first class."

There was a strange light in the wounded man's eyes as he listened to the words of the little sport, and he surveyed Davy so closely that the gambler actually seemed to shrink before the scrutiny.

"I believe I have seen you before," observed Sile.

"Acknowledged!" assented Davy. "I was once unfortunate enough to be a captive in your hands. You intended to keep your face concealed behind a mask, but one day it fell off by accident, and I had a fair view of your features. However much you may deny it, you are Captain Blood!"

Without a word, but with a look that could not be mistaken, and which caused the hot blood to flush Davy's cheeks more redly, Sile turned away.

"Men of Early Bird," he calmly spoke, facing the scowling throng, "I am ready to stand my trial. All I ask of you is a white show, and I know the most of you must be men who love fair play."

"You shall have an honest show, or my name is not Hunter," assured the major, who had leaped down from the bar and forced his way to the center of the throng. "I do not believe in jumping on a man unless I know I am right."

As he passed through the crowd, his shoulder brushed against that of Injun Jim, whose eyes glittered with deadly hatred and whose hand rested on the haft of a keen knife.

But, the major was unharmed, although Death stood close.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAJOR'S ASSERTION.

THE wounded man was taken to the little jail of the town and left there under guard.

Although he made no pretense of acting as an escort, Easy Ned kept at the prisoner's side until the jail door was reached.

Harold Dustan also went along, having taken a great interest in the unfortunate fellow who had been exposed by the dapper card-sharp. Harold gave such encouragement as he could, and Sile—he had acknowledged no other name—expressed his appreciation and thanks.

Finding Major Hunter was in earnest to give the captive a fair show, Dapper Davy desisted in his purpose of urging the excited mob to immediately lynch the one he had accused. He went to the jail with the others, and when the door had closed on Sile, he warned the throng against allowing the man to escape.

"You know the record of Captain Blood, pards," he cried, loud enough for all to hear. "It is his boast that no jail can hold him, and he has slipped out of many a tight corner. If he tricks you this time, it will be through no fault of mine."

With this, seeming to consider his duty done, he turned back toward the Palace Saloon, leaving the others to arrange the guard to suit themselves.

It was finally decided two men should remain close at hand outside the jail, while Hogshead Harkins watched the captive from within. This was a position Harkins craved, as he was thirsting for notoriety.

The prisoner seemed to take things quite coolly, and he immediately attempted to make himself agreeable to Mr. Harkins.

At first the corpulent guard was surly, but Sile worked upon his vanity by declaring he knew he must be a "man with a record," else he would not have been selected as guard over such a dangerous chap as Captain Blood, even though Blood was disarmed and bound.

Harkins had kept a cocked and ready revolver in his hand, even though the prisoner was helpless to aid himself, and at every restless motion of Sile, the weapon would be held ready for instant use.

"Wal, I don't mind 'lowin' I hev downed my man more nor one time," bra-tfully nodded the corpulent tough. "I'm a pretty bad man w'en I'm started, an' it don't take much ter start me."

"I knew it."

Sile made the assertion with a soberness that was very convincing—to Harkins. The big fel-

low produced a plug of tobacco and bit off a huge "chaw." The dim light of a swinging lantern fell full on his face, while that of the man he was guarding was mostly in shadow.

Once having the ice broken, the prisoner was not long in getting Hawkins to talking, and skillfully led the tough to speak of Early Bird and its inhabitants. Sile asked scores of questions, and Harkins was flattered into answering them all, telling all he knew concerning Dapper Davy, Major Hunter and Easy Ned. The prisoner seemed singularly interested in the last.

"Him an' Davy's rivals in more ways than one," asserted the corpulent guard. "They're ther two leadin' sports of ther camp, an' they're both over head an' heels stuck on Harvy Klaw's gal."

"Who is Harvey Klaw?"

"Now don't yer go fer ter ask me too much 'bout him, fer thar don't anybody seem ter know much who he is ur w'at he is."

"Then he is something of a mystery?"

"Thet's it! thet's it! He's a mystery as they can't solve. He lives in a leetle cabin up on ther Shelf, an' his darter lives thar with him. Poorty—wal, you bet she is! I hain't much on describin' gals, so I can't tell yer how she looks, but she's a daisy!"

"Where does the mystery come in?"

"Wal, it's how ole Klaw gits his livin'. He allus hes money enough, an' he hain't been never knowed ter do a stroke of work."

"That's queer."

"It jest is! An' thar is them as hev bin bold enough ter hint as how it hain't his gal as stays with him, though I w'u'dn't keer ter be tellin' sech a thing."

"What makes them think she is not his girl?"

"I dunno jest what; but I must 'low she don't look nary smitch like him. He's ugly as sin, an' she's purty as a posy—she jest is!"

"You are interesting me in her. By Jove! I will have to call on her when I get out of this scrape."

"W'en ye do git out," came half-sneeringly from the guard's lips. "Wal, ef yer ever has ther luck ter git out of it, I'd 'dvice yer ter keep clear of Vira Klaw."

"Why?"

"It hain't healthy ter go nosin' round ther Shelf."

"This Easy Ned and this Dapper Davy—don't they go up there?"

"Not very often, though they does sometimes. Ther old man's swore ter shoot Davy more ner oncet, but thet leetle devil don't keer a hoot fer nuthin'."

Thus they talked on for some time until there came a peculiar knock on the door, at which Harkins quickly started up, as if it were a signal understood by him.

"What is it?" asked the prisoner.

"Only ther boss."

"The boss?"

"Major Hunter."

Harkins undid the fastenings of the door, and the magnate of Early Bird entered.

"Leave us alone together for a short time," he said to the guard. "I will take care the prisoner does not make a break, and I will call you when you are wanted."

"All right," mumbled Harkins, and he immediately retired.

Major Hunter promptly approached Sile, who was regarding him curiously.

"Well, young man," said the leading citizen of the town, "you have fallen into a pretty scrape!"

"It may look that way to you," retorted Sile, with a grim smile; "but I will confess I fail to detect the agreeable features of it."

"You take it coolly."

"What's the use of taking it any other way?"

"Are you aware a mob of armed men may come down on this jail before morning and drag you out to be lynched?"

"I have thought it possible I might be treated in such a manner, but your assurance that you would do all you could for me gave me some relief."

The major shifted his weight from one foot to another.

"I have some influence in this town," he acknowledged; "but I am not all-powerful, by any means. If the mob should be thoroughly aroused, they might lynch you for all of my efforts to prevent."

"Then I trust they will not become aroused."

"I hope so, for your sake; but I should desire to get out of this position as soon as possible, if I were you."

"That is about the way I feel."

"Perhaps I can aid you."

"I hope so."

"Of course you still deny being Captain Blood?"

"I do."

"And you are not one of his men?"

"Nixey, major; I am not in that line of business."

"But there is something mysterious about you."

"Really?"

"I am in earnest. You were in disguise to-night, playing a part. What was your object?"

"I trust you will not feel offended, major, if I decline to answer that question. I had a reason for visiting the Palace Saloon in disguise, and my artifice would not have been detected but for Dapper Davy."

"That is all very true, but now it has been detected, you will have to explain in order to save your own skin. I trust you will not be foolish about this matter, for it is more serious, possibly, than you imagine. If you will tell me the truth—the whole truth—I will see what can be done for you to-night. It is not safe for you to remain here, and I will see if my friends will not take you away to a place of safety."

"You seem very kind, major, and I hate to offend you in the slightest manner; but my business is such that it would be folly to talk."

The major allowed himself to scowl somewhat, and then he squatted on his heels close at the prisoner's side.

"Very well," he said, grimly, "if you will not talk, I shall have to tell you who and what you are, for I know."

"Drive ahead, major."

"You are Sam Sheridan—Secret Service Sam, the Government Detective, and you are in Early Bird on a private mission of great importance!"

CHAPTER VI.

INJUN JIM BEFRIENDS THE PRISONER.

MAJOR HUNTER made the assertion in the most positive manner, as if he was fully convinced on the point, not a doubt concerning the identity of the prisoner remaining in his mind.

The helpless man did not betray any emotion at all. If the magnate of Early Bird had expected him to start or utter an exclamation of surprise, he was disappointed. If any change of expression passed over Sile's face, the wretched light failed to reveal it.

"This is getting interesting," he calmly observed. "Only a short time ago I was accused of being a desperate and dangerous outlaw, and now I am charged with being a detective. Yes, it is getting very interesting!"

"But you do not deny it," hastily swept in the major. "You did deny being the outlaw, but you do not deny being Secret Service Sam."

"You have scarcely given me time to deny it, if I wished to do so. Perhaps I do not intend to deny it."

"Then you confess—you acknowledge you are the detective?"

"Do I?"

"Don't you?"

"Not yet. I am considering."

"What are you considering?"

"Whether it is the more healthy thing in this town to be a detective or an outlaw."

For an instant, Hunter seemed silenced; but he soon recovered.

"Your experience ought to show you it is not at all a healthy thing to be taken for Captain Blood. Had I not stood by you in the saloon, you would have been lynched by the mob. As it is, I fancy they intend taking you out of this before morning."

"For the purpose of hanging me?"

"That is about the size of it."

"Well, that is agreeable information. It tends to make one feel real jolly and pleasant."

"That is why I am here," asserted the major, nervously. "I came with the view of getting at the truth. If you are Captain Blood, that lets me out; I shall have no further interest in defending you from the mob."

"You would not wish me to have a fair trial?"

"Were it certain you are the outlaw, a trial would be superfluous, for it could only have one termination."

"And if I tell you I am Secret Service Sam—what then?"

"I will see what I can do for you."

"How could you know I was telling you the truth? How could you know I was not lying to you in order to save my neck?"

The major hesitated, as if perplexed by the question, while something like a smile played

about the beardless lips of the prisoner. Indeed, the captive seemed to actually enjoy the situation.

"I should have to take my chances on that," the magnate finally confessed; "but there is something about you that makes me think you are honest—that you would not deliberately tell a lie even to save your neck."

"If I am honest, I cannot be this outlaw."

"Of course not."

"And if I am the outlaw, you are deceived in thinking me honest. Major, is it not plain to you that you should do whatever you can for me, regardless of what I may say concerning myself, as anything I say will not change the situation? If I am Captain Blood, and I think I can save my neck by claiming to be a detective, what is more natural than that I should make such a claim? You must see how the land lays, major?"

It was evident Hunter did not like this manner of placing the situation, for he nestled uneasily and cleared his throat before saying anything further. Then he observed:

"I will feel better in my own mind if I have your assurance you are the detective."

"You already have my assurance I am not Captain Blood."

"Yes."

"I give you my word of honor I am an honest man."

"Good!"

"Is that not enough? Are you not one who will do all he can for an honest man in peril, whether he is a detective or not?"

"Oh, yes—yes—of course—certainly!" stammered the magnate, somewhat taken aback.

"Then that settles it, major. I know you will keep the mob from lynching me without giving me a show."

"But—but, I wished to know this detective; I think I can give him some tips."

"In case I were the detective, this would scarcely be the place to give me tips, while my life is in constant danger. From what you have inferred, I have surmised the mob might come down on me any time. A dead detective can extract very little comfort from tips, dear sir."

Major Hunter was baffled in his purpose, and he drew back somewhat sullenly, arising to his feet. At first, it seemed as if he would leave the prisoner without any further words, but, if he had thought of such a thing, he quickly changed his mind.

"I am sorry you have not seen fit to take me into your confidence," he said, regretfully; "for I am certain it would have been to your advantage. However, I suppose you believe you know your own business best. I must leave you now, but I will see what can be done for you."

"You might do something now."

"What?"

"Loosen these cords somewhat, so I can free my hands. If the mob comes down on the jail, I do not wish to die like a dog, without being able to make a single struggle for life."

"I do not dare do so," asserted the major.

"The boys know I am in here alone with you, and they would accuse me of treachery, were I to fix your bonds so you could break free. You might overpower Harkins and force him to signal the outer guards to remove the door fastenings. Then you could leap out and make a break for liberty. No," and he soberly shook his head, "I cannot do that; but within the hour I may be able to raise a band of masked men who will come here and release you. If I am with them, my disguise will be such that to-morrow no man in Early Bird can accuse me of taking a hand in the affair. Keep up hope, young man."

With this final admonition, the major departed, and Hogshead Harkins returned to his post of duty.

The prisoner lay and reflected on all that had occurred, and he was led to decide there was something very queer about the major's visit. The more he thought about it, the greater became his uneasiness.

Within thirty minutes after Hunter's exit, there came, once more, a singular rap on the door. Harkins seemed to understand it, for he immediately hastened forward and undid the fastenings.

Immediately a form, cloaked in a huge blanket, strode into the jail. Out from beneath the blanket shot an uplifted arm, the hand of which grasped a knotted club, and a moment later, Harkins was tumbled over on the ground, killed or stunned by the heavy blow.

Then the blanket was thrown back, revealing a dark, swarthy face, from which peered two eyes of midnight blackness.

It was the half-blood, Injun Jim.

At first the prisoner fancied the lynchers had come, and he utterly helpless!

But, Jim lifted his hand, making a gesture of caution.

"White pard must not be afraid," he said, in a low tone. "I am not here to do him hurt; but out in the town of the whites many wolves thirst for his blood. The moon is a rainbow in the west, but when it has fallen behind the mountains, the white wolves will be here, led by the double-face. If they find my white pard, they will drink his blood, concealed by the darkness they love."

"That might be fun for them," grimly observed the captive; "but I don't reckon I would find a great amount of hilarity in the little picnic."

"Would my white pard escape?"

"Would I? Well, I should smile!"

"I am a half-blood—my mother was a Ute. The pale-faces despise me. Would the white captive despise me, should I help him to avoid the treachery of the double-face?"

"Not to any great extent! I am not the kind of a galoot that despises any one who saves my life, it don't make a tinker's bit of difference what his color may be."

"I came here to save the white captive. Outside the door two of the white wolves lay dead. I had to kill them, for I am Jim! They were the tools of the double-face, and he destroyed the Red Rose. His time is near! Another moon will see the work finished, and the Rose will rest in her soft bed down under the moss."

"I don't know what in thunder you are talking about, old man," observed the prisoner; "but I do know I am just a trifle anxious about getting my hands and feet free and taking a sneak. I am afraid the lynchers may drop down this way before shortly."

"Not till the moon is lost behind the mountains, and that will be yet a little time."

However, the half-blood immediately cut the prisoner's bonds, and Sile hastily arose to his feet, a sigh of relief coming from his lips.

After this they lost little time in getting out of the jail, closing and fastening the door behind them.

"I only wish I had my revolvers," muttered the released captive.

Without a word the half-blood placed the weapons in his companion's hands.

"Where did you find them?" asked Sile, in astonishment.

"One of the guards had them."

"Well, you're a brick! I'm ready to swear by you, pard!"

But Injun Jim only said:

"Come."

The liberated prisoner followed his strange benefactor.

Half an hour later they halted on a shelf-like ledge some distance up the mountain-side, from which point they could look down on the town beneath.

"See!" exclaimed the half-breed, catching the other by the arm and pointing downward with his other hand. "The moonlight has made room for the shadows down there, and the white wolves are starting for the feast. They will be disappointed. Great will be the fury of the wolves when they find their cage empty."

The white man looked down, and along the main street of the town he saw a procession of dark forms moving. They would have been hidden by the darkness had they not carried torches, which they waved above their heads.

As this mob approached the jail, the men of which it was composed quickened their steps, loud shouts and yells breaking from their lips. Gradually these sounds mingled and blended, till they became one steady, terrible cry—the cry for blood!

The white man shuddered, but something almost like a laugh came from the lips of the red-skin.

"Wait—wait till they find the cage empty," he said; "then you will hear their fury."

"Partner," soberly spoke the white, as his hand sought that of the half-blood, "I owe you a heavy debt. How can I reward you?"

"Jim's reward will be the fury and dismay of the double-face," was the reply. "He asks no more."

CHAPTER VII.

MORE EXCITEMENT.

EARLY BIRD BAR passed a feverish night. Great was the commotion caused by the escape of the prisoner and the death of the two guards who had been stationed on the outside of the jail. The little town fairly seethed.

Now there seemed no doubt but the prisoner was really Captain Blood, the outlaw. Many

times before had the desperado been captured or cornered, but he had always escaped.

It was a singular thing that no one seemed to know exactly what the famous outlaw looked like. There were a dozen descriptions of him afloat, for it was said he was an adept at assuming disguises.

Major Hunter kept well in the background until after it was discovered the prisoner had escaped, and then he made himself prominent once more, being inclined to coincide with the general opinion that the captive had really been the outlaw.

Some hot words passed between Dapper Davy and the major, for the little sport accused the magnate of being the real cause of the outlaw's escape.

"I am not questioning your intentions, major," came swiftly from Davy's lips; "but you made a mistake in not allowing the boys to string the wretch up when we first caught him. I winged him fairly and exposed his trick to the crowd. He would have been hanging to the limb of a tree ten minutes later, if you had not thrust in your oar."

"I did what I believed for the best," retorted the major, stiffly; "and I am ready to defend my action in any manner, sir!"

For a moment, it seemed that Davy would accept the challenge, but he decided to turn it off with a laugh.

Easy Ned and Harold Dustan kept in the background. Dustan was a man with a strong antipathy toward gamblers, but something seemed to draw him toward the brown-bearded sport.

"There is something queer about this whole affair," asserted Ned, speaking to Harold. "I am more than half-inclined to think Major Hunter insincere from the beginning, although I am free to confess I do not comprehend his object. Of course you would stand by the major, being in his employ?"

"I shall not be in his employ after tomorrow."

"No? How is that?"

"I have decided to leave him."

"What is the cause?"

"I do not think it would be right for me to tell. I shall not betray any of his secrets I may have suspected."

"Well, I like that!"

"Yes?"

"Surely. It is a point of honor, and I do admire a square man."

With that, the matter was dropped between them.

Of course a search was made for the escaped prisoner, but he was not found.

"It will be a long day before we get our hands on him again," said Dapper Davy, regretfully.

Hogshead Harkins had been found fastened within the jail, but so dazed by the terrific blow he had received he could give no coherent account of anything. When he was told the other guards were dead, he utterly collapsed.

That night a Vigilance Committee was organized in Early Bird and a reward offered for the capture of Captain Blood.

In the early morning, Harvey Klaw came rushing into town, hatless, coatless and wildly excited.

"My daughter—my girl Vira—she's gone!" he panted.

A dozen men questioned him at once.

"I found her gone this morning. Her bed was slept in last night, but things were scattered around the room and it looked like there had been a struggle, though I never heard a sound in the night. Some devil was there and carried her off! I'll have his life when I find him!"

"Captain Blood!"

That was the name which passed from lip to lip, and men freely expressed their belief that this was some of the outlaw's work. He had probably perpetrated the deed after escaping from the jail.

Vira Klaw was a favorite in Early Bird, despite the close watch kept over her by her father. Many of the miners had seen and admired her, and she had always spoken kindly to every one she happened to meet, therefore the news of her probable abduction aroused a perfect whirlwind of popular fury.

What was to be done?

That was a question that received a great deal of discussion.

Up to the home of Harvey Klaw, on the shelf overlooking the town, went the most of the citizens, and the signs of a struggle within the girl's room at the cabin were viewed by them all. They were universal in agreeing that Vira had been abducted.

Business was suspended in Early Bird for the

day, and an indignation meeting was held. The result was that the reward for the capture of Captain Blood was doubled.

Meantime, Dapper Davy had drawn Harvey Klaw aside where no one could overhear what passed between them.

"What's this you say?" hotly demanded the little sport. "The girl been carried away?"

Klaw nodded, rubbing his bony hands together nervously.

"She's gone," he mumbled. "Of course she was carried away. There is no other explanation."

"Are you sure?"

Davy looked at the other in a way that made Klaw tremble.

"Of course I am sure."

"You have not been listening to any of her foolishness and decided to trick me?"

"No."

"Do you swear it?"

"I do."

"I suppose you know you lose your income when you lose her?"

"Yes—yes; but it is not my fault. I have told you the truth—nothing but the truth."

"Who could have carried her off?"

"Oh, don't ask me!"

"It could not have been Dustan, the new foreman of the Gloriana."

"He only met her once—by accident."

"And he was in town during all the excitement last night."

"But Captain Blood—"

"Bah! Don't talk like a fool, man!" And with that, Davy abruptly left the other.

It was shortly afterward that Easy Ned found an opportunity to speak with Klaw. The brown-bearded gambler looked decidedly angry, and he caught the other savagely by the shoulder, demanding:

"What is this bluff you are giving the town, anyway? Don't try to fool me, for you should know better. Give it to me straight."

"There is no bluff about it, Ned; it's all right," whined Harvey Klaw, his eyes failing to meet those of the sport.

"All right! I should say all wrong! I'm afraid you have not been treating the girl white."

"Yes, I have."

"You have not driven her to any desperate act?"

"No, no!"

"You have not attempted to force her into marrying that little reprobate, Dapper Davy?"

"No."

"Do you swear it?"

"Yes, I swear it."

"Davy is in love with her, you have confessed. She told me so in the first place, and then I forced an acknowledgment from her lips. She was afraid of him, and she declared she would kill herself rather than become his wife."

"She talked too much!" growled Klaw, with a sudden show of anger. "She had no right to think Davy wanted to marry her, for he never intimated as much."

"Perhaps not by words; but she is a shrewd girl, and she could read his looks and acts. I am going to probe this matter to the bottom, old man, and if I find you have been playing me, it will be the worse for you—and Dapper Davy. I have it in for him, anyway. The only thing that has saved him is his size. It seemed to me like a man jumping on a boy, and I have been ashamed to climb him. You had better think it over, uncle, and, if you have not given me a square spread, the sooner you do so, the better it will be. Ta, ta."

Easy Ned drifted toward another part of the town, catching a glimpse of Harold Dustan, who was just entering the private office of Major Hunter.

"He is going to put in his resignation, I'll venture," thought the sport.

Ned was right.

Great was the major's surprise and indignation when Dustan expressed a determination to withdraw from his service.

"You can't mean it, young man?" he cried.

"I certainly do," was the firm retort.

"But, sir, this is unexpected—it is astounding. I do not understand it!"

"I trust you will not ask me to make any explanations, Major Hunter."

"Then you put your trust in vanity, for I demand an explanation. Have I not used you well?"

"You have."

"Then what are your reasons for leaving me?"

"I am not a fool, major, even though you may have taken me for one."

"Egad! this is astounding! Took you for a fool! Why, I took you for an uncommonly smart young man. If I had not, why should I have given you the responsible position you hold?"

"You had a purpose, major," was the cool reply. "Perhaps you fancied I was quite green about mining matters and would not know you are working a played-out shaft."

The magnate of Early Bird gasped.

"Played out?"

"That is what I said, sir. You keep a large force of men at work on the Gloriana, and the ore does not return twenty-five cents on a dollar's expense."

The major almost danced up and down the little office.

"What is this to you, sir—what is this to you? I may have a purpose—I may wish to sell this mine."

"You do not wish to sell it."

"Eh? Blow me! You say that?"

"I do, for you have thrust aside two opportunities since I entered your employ. I do not pretend to fathom your secrets, Major Hunter—I do not wish to do so. That is why I am leaving you. There is a certain part of that mine I have never been permitted to visit—a part that is constantly guarded by armed men. You have a secret, sir, and—"

"You mean to leave my employ and then blow. Curse you, if—"

Harold checked the angry man with a gesture.

"Stop, Major Hunter!" came coldly from his lips. "I am a man of honor; I blow on no one who has used me white. Whatever I may have discovered while in your employ will not be mentioned by me after I leave it. Pride, as much as anything else, has caused my withdrawal, for I have discovered myself a figurehead—nothing more."

The mine-owner almost fell into a chair.

"Well," he said, faintly, "this knocks me! I must say you are sharper than I gave you credit."

Harold flushed at this.

"I have no desire to continue playing the fool, sir."

"You need not. Remain in my employ and your salary shall be doubled."

"What shall I do to earn it?"

"As you can keep a secret so well, I will see that you have employment," replied the major, cautiously and mysteriously.

The young man looked at him in silence for a full minute.

"No," he finally said, "I do not care to do it. Consider the matter settled, major."

Then he withdrew from the office, leaving an angry and uneasy man behind.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOST AND FOUND.

"WELL, it strikes me I am lost! I must confess I do not know which way from the other!"

The speaker was a young and beautiful girl, not over seventeen years of age, graceful as a fawn. Her supple, slender figure was adorned by a garment that certainly would not have been considered fashionable in the "effete East," but which, nevertheless, seemed charmingly adapted to her surroundings.

Those surroundings were the grand old mountains towering on either hand, wooded and barren, cut, notched, ribbed and seamed after a manner that made the scenery wild, picturesque and awesome.

The girl was sitting on a bowlder, her hat on the ground at her feet, a look of dejection on her piquant face. Still, she did not seem so very downcast for one who had just declared herself lost amid the mountain wilds.

Around the girl's trim waist was a sash, into which was thrust a small silver-mounted revolver.

"Yes, it strikes me I am lost," she repeated, as she looked around her. "This running away may prove a decidedly serious thing. I am liable to be devoured by wild beasts, fall into the hands of outlaws, or something terrible and romantic may befall me. If I only might get into some awful scrape and then have a gallant lover to rush to my rescue, as they do in stories! Oh, my! Wouldn't it be jolly!"

She ended with a merry little laugh that cleared her face of the deeper shadows and made her look like some light-hearted nymph of the mountain wilds.

This was Harvey Klaw's daughter, who was missing from her father's cabin, and whom the greater portion of Early Bird believed Captain Blood guilty of abducting.

From the girl's soliloquy it was evident she had not been kidnapped at all, but had run away of her own accord.

And now she was lost!

The position was one that might have caused a man no little dismay and uneasiness, but her distress seemed no more than momentary.

"I had rather remain lost and starve here amid the glorious old mountains than go back there!" she resolutely cried, giving her dark head a toss. "Harvey Klaw may be my father, but I am sure I do not feel toward him as a daughter should, and I don't believe I am so very much to blame, either. He is not an affectionate father, by any means, and then what I heard yesterday—my!"

She pressed her lips tightly together and her eyes flashed angrily. Plainly, whatever she had heard had not pleased her at all.

"To think of his selling me to that miserable little gambler, Dapper Davy!" Vira exclaimed, almost savagely. "That must be what he did, for I saw Davy pay him money, and I heard Davy say he would take me away when he got good and ready. And more than one of father's hints has made me think he intended for me to marry Davy. Marry him! I'd sooner marry a snake! Why, I'd marry Ned Lester first, and goodness knows I wouldn't do that if I could help it!"

"I have never yet seen the fellow I cared enough about to marry—unless—unless—"

She paused, and a soft blush stole over her face.

"I don't know anything about him," she finally murmured. "I only saw him once, when we met by accident, and then father was so angry when he discovered us. He said his name was Harold Dustan and he was employed in the Gloriana Mine. He was a perfect gentleman, and so handsome! Why, we became acquainted in less than five minutes."

"But father never allowed me to see him afterward," she continued, with a sigh and a look of sadness. "I did dream of him. I suppose it was foolish of me, for he probably never gave me a second thought after we parted, and I doubt if I ever see him again. Father says all girls are foolish, and I don't know but he is right."

For awhile she was silent, then she suddenly slipped down from the rock, picked up her hat, and exclaimed:

"Well, I am hungry, and it does not pay to be romantic when one is hungry. I feel like I could eat anything! I wonder if I can't knock over something with my revolver."

Then she set out in search for some kind of game, and within a short time was fortunate enough to kill some birds with her revolver.

"I hated to shoot you, my beauties," Vira murmured, as she smoothed their glossy feathers, a tear in her eye. "But it was a case of necessity."

She found a place in a secluded hollow where she could build a fire, near a cool spring, from which a tiny brook trickled away into the shadows. There she dressed her game, and prepared the birds for roasting.

The delicious aroma of cooking fowl was filling the glade, when the maiden was startled by the sound of a cautious footfall. She wheeled swiftly, her tiny revolver ready for use, and confronted a man who stepped out of the shadows.

"Halt, sir!" cried Vira. "Who are— My gracious!"

It was Harold Dustan!

It is impossible to describe the girl's astonishment at the appearance of the young man whom she had met once before, and of whom she had been thinking within the hour.

"Miss Klaw!"

"Mr. Dustan!"

"I have found you!"

"It looks that way."

"You don't know what a pretty picture you make! This little glade—that fire—the rising smoke—and you—"

He paused, plainly unable to express his feelings, but there was a look of deep and sincere admiration on his face—a look she could not fail to understand. It brought still more color to her already rosy cheeks.

"But how does it happen you are here, Mr. Dustan?" she asked.

"I was searching for you and—and— Where is he?" Looking around, as his hand fell on the butt of a revolver.

"He?—who?"

"Captain Blood."

"What of him?"

"Why, all Early Bird believes you kidnapped by the outlaw known as Captain Blood."

"Then all Early Bird is very much mistaken."

"You were not kidnapped?"

"Not any! I just took a notion to skip. You know I told you how tired I was of being kept so close, and watched so snugly. Well, I just made up my mind I wouldn't stand it any longer, and I dusted."

Harold laughed heartily.

"I must say I admire your grit," he declared, as he advanced; "but I cannot say as much for your judgment. Why, it was fearfully rash of you to do such a thing! You might have fallen into the hands of the outlaws, or been killed by wild animals, or been lost and—"

"Lost! That's just what I was, and it is jolly fun! I really enjoy being lost by my lonesome. But now you've found me and spoiled it all!"

"Oh, is that the way you look at it?" he exclaimed, in dismay. "Then I must be an intruder?"

"Oh, no, no! I did not mean that—honestly I didn't! You have spoiled my being lost, but I really believe I am glad you found me to dine with me."

"I am sure I shall be delighted," and he lifted his hat. "Anything prepared by those little hands—"

"There, there, there! that will do! The first time I saw you I told you I did not like flattery. You must have forgotten."

"Not that. I was telling the simple truth, and the truth cannot be flattery."

"But the truth should not be spoken at all times, you know."

"Well, this is one of the times that is not included in the list of 'all.' And then they both laughed merrily."

In a very short time they were enjoying the birds, which were delicious, despite the fact that they had not been seasoned at all. Both were hungry, and it seemed such jolly sport to eat in such an unconventional fashion that almost anything might have tasted agreeable.

"I should think you would have to be attending to business in the mine at this hour of the day," observed Vira.

"Business is utterly suspended in Early Bird to-day."

"How is that?"

Then he told her of the happenings which occurred the previous night and how the fact that she was supposed to be abducted by the escaped outlaw had caused the citizens of the town to give over business for the time.

Vira laughed.

"Well, I had not the least idea I would create such a sensation in the town. I suppose armed parties of would-be rescuers are searching for these outlaws now?"

"You are right. I took a fancy to look for you all by my lonesome, and luck led me to the right spot. It was all a matter of chance—it must have been."

"Why not call it fate, Mr. Dustan?"

He observed the queer look on her face, and her eyes fell before his searching glance.

"Very well," he replied, speaking with sudden gravity; "we will call it fate, Miss Klaw. Perhaps that is what it really was. Won't you tell me something about yourself? I am interested in you, and I fancy you must have a story."

"A story? Oh, I don't know. What do you mean?"

"There seems to be some mystery about you—something I do not understand. What was your object in running away? and what are your plans?"

"My object was to escape from a hateful bondage. As for my plans, I really do not know as I have any."

"Your father—pardon me—misuses you?"

"I think so. He says I am too high-spirited. He never beats me, or anything like that. I would not endure it! But he keeps me so close and watches over me so snugly! I have become tired of it."

"Your mother, of course, is dead?"

A look of uncertainty came over her face, and she lifted a hand to her forehead.

"Yes," she said, slowly, "I think so; but—I am—not certain. I do not seem to remember, and father will not talk of her. Do you know"—with sudden confidence—"I have sometimes thought Harvey Klaw is not my father."

"It is possible you are right," said Harold. "I have thought such a thing might be, for you do not resemble him in the least. There really is a mystery concerning your past!"

"I am a mystery to myself. Cousin Ned sometimes calls me the Enigma."

"Cousin Ned?"

"Yes; Ned Lester. Do you know him?"

"Well—slightly! And is he really your cousin?"

"I suppose so. Anyway, Harvey Klaw is his uncle, though they do not publicly acknowledge the relationship."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know, unless it is because Ned is a gambler, like Dapper Davy. Oh, there is a creature I hate and despise!"

"Why should you hate him?"

She hesitated, and then, all of a sudden, resolved to give him her full confidence.

"I fear him, as well as hate him. I believe he possesses some claim on me."

"A claim on you?"

"Yes."

"I can't tell just when I first suspected he had a claim on me, but yesterday I saw him pay father some money, and I heard him say he would take me away when he got ready."

A look of amazement and rage passed over the young man's face.

"Take you away? Great Scott! Has your father entered into some villainous bargain with that despicable little card-sharp?"

"That is what I feared, and that is why I ran away."

"Well, I do not blame you. I believe Dapper Davy is a snake in the grass, and the sooner his head is crushed the better it will be for the country."

They talked on in this manner for some time. Suddenly, Vira uttered a cry of terror and sprung up. At the same moment, four masked men sprung out of the shadows, two of whom flung themselves on Harold.

Although taken by surprise, the young man was not to be easily overpowered, and he at once made a desperate resistance.

"Keep still, young feller!" snarled one of the men, flashing a knife before Harold's eyes. "Ef yer don't, we'll cut yer wozzle!"

But the ex-foreman caught the man's wrist and gave it such a wrench that the knife was dropped. Then Harold succeeded in giving one of the masked men a swinging blow that knocked him down. He clinched with the other, and a desperate battle began.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WOMAN OF THE CRIMSON HANDS.

HARVEY KLAU sat alone in his cabin. The night shadows had fallen, and the fate of Vira was still unsolved.

"What could have become of the girl?" muttered the man, a heavy scowl on his face. "She has threatened to run away more than once, but I scarcely believe she had the courage to do so. She was kidnapped, but who could have done the work. It is certain Davy knew nothing of it, for his anger was genuine."

There came a knock on the door. Klaw drew and cocked a revolver.

"Come in!" he called.

The door swung open, and a woman entered. At sight of her, Harvey Klaw leaped to his feet, dropping the revolver on the floor.

"Delva Murella!"

"That is my name," bowed the woman, who was beautiful, although far from being young. "It is plain you were not expecting me."

Klaw dropped back in the chair.

"Expecting you! I would as soon have thought of seeing—the—the—"

Her black eyes flashed.

"Don't stammer over it. You would have as soon expected to see the devil, eh?"

He nodded.

"Well, it doesn't make much difference," she declared, showing her teeth in a cold smile.

"Give us your hand, old man!"

But Harvey Klaw made no offer to comply with the request. Instead of that, he drew back, staring in a half-horrified manner at the small hand she extended to him.

No wonder!

It was blood red in color!

The woman's other hand was also crimson to the wrist!

She dropped the red hand by her side, a harsh laugh breaking from her lips.

"Oh, well!" she said; "I suppose you are afraid of it, like a fool! It is a simple birthmark, but it makes people shudder when they see those hands."

"It seems like they had been dipped in blood!" came from the man's white lips.

At this, the woman paled somewhat, and her lips closed tightly, for the moment.

"Perhaps they do look like that," she confessed; "but that is no sign blood has ever drenched them. Don't be a fool, Klaw, and ruffle my temper! I am not in the best of moods,

as it is, for Davy tells me the girl has disappeared."

"It is true."

"What has become of her?"

"You know as well as I."

The Woman of the Crimson Hands sat down on a chair.

"Well, this is a pretty scrape!" she cried, her eyes flashing. "What do we pay you for? You were to keep a close watch over her."

"And I wonder if I have not done so for years!" resentfully retorted the hermit of the Shelf. "I fancy that is the trouble—I have watched her too closely."

"What do you mean?"

"She is getting too old to endure such surveillance."

"Ho, ho! Showing spirit, is she?"

"What would you think of her if she did not?"

"It's all the better—all the better! I will break her!"

"You will have to find her before you do."

"I do not worry about that, Harvey Klaw. I shall surely find her. If she has run away—"

"But her room looked as if she had been kidnapped. There were indications of a struggle."

"And yet you heard nothing of it? Well, I do not take any stock in that. She was cunning enough to arrange things in that fashion, so that you would be deceived."

"If she ran away, she will surely perish amid the mountains."

The woman remained silent for a time, and then she muttered, speaking to herself:

"Have I kept her all these years for nothing? No, no! Fate will not have it so! She was *his* child, and yet I hate her for her mother's sake. She is my hold upon the man who put this crimson curse upon me. I fear him, for I believe he is still searching for me. He has not forgiven or forgotten."

"What are you talking about?" asked Harvey Klaw, a puzzled look on his face.

"She started."

"Was I talking? I did not know it. Never mind; it was nothing—nothing."

But, he was not deceived; he knew that a secret—perhaps a terrible secret—lay deep in the heart of the Woman with the Crimson Hands.

"Davy told me everything," she asserted; "but I felt that I must come to see you. In the morning the search will be continued. We shall find her."

"Perhaps not."

"I have no doubt about it. Sam Sheridan must not see her."

"Who?"

"Sam Sheridan. Last night he was in Early Bird; but to night—"

"He is here!"

The door was flung open, and a tall, handsome, stern-faced man strode into the room.

The woman uttered a shriek of fear, and fell back, while Harvey Klaw tried to snatch his revolver from the floor. The commanding voice of the new-comer prevented him from doing so.

"Lift it at your peril! I will send a bullet through your head the moment your fingers close on the butt!"

Like a flash, a cocked weapon had found its way to the speaker's hand, and the muzzle was turned toward the hermit of the Shelf.

Klaw straightened up and glared at the intruder.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Sam Sheridan—Secret Service Sam, a man in the employ of the United States Government!"

"What do you want here?"

"Ask that woman!"

But, Delva Murella was in no condition to answer questions just then. With one crimson hand pressed to her heaving breast, she stood glaring at Sam Sheridan, mingled hatred and fear pictured on her countenance.

Something like a smile flashed across the stern face of the detective, but it did not light up his countenance with the kind of mirth that is pleasant to contemplate.

"My regular duties brought me to this place," he said, coldly, "and I had little thought of finding you here, Delva Murella."

"You lie!" gasped the woman, her lips quivering and her black eyes glowing. "You are bounding me!"

"Why should I be?"

"God knows!" And then, suddenly holding up her crimson hands, she shrieked: "Look—look at your work, you devil! Those hands were white as snow until you stained them with some coloring that nothing will remove!"

"Those hands were white till you stained them with the blood of an innocent man!" was

the stern retort. "You lured Dallas Sheridan from the wife of his bosom! How you did it is more than I can tell; but it must be you hypnotized him—bewitched—bedeviled him! I have fancied a strange power lies hidden in those black eyes of yours. You cannot deny you lured him from her and home!"

"I do deny it! He deserted her of his own free will and fled with me."

"Had he done so, death at your hands would have been a just reward for his folly. But, I knew my brother better than any one else, and I know he was true as steel. It was your accursed influence that led him astray!"

"And it was *her* influence that robbed me of him! He loved me before he ever saw her, and yet she stole him from me. Were it true that I lured him away, it would have simply been a just revenge on her, who once claimed to be my friend!"

"You have two lives to answer for—perhaps three. Deserted by her husband, robbed of her only child, her heart was broken, and she found rest in the grave. And then, when Dallas repented and would have left you, you stabbed him to the heart!"

"Where is your proof?"

"I have it, woman! I had not, seven years ago, but I marked you so you could not escape me. I believed your hands were stained with his blood, and I caused them to become crimson, so that I might know you wherever you were. Since then I have been seeking to find the proof."

"And you have it?"

"Yes, I have it, now!"

"Bah! Do not seek to frighten me into a confession, for the trick will not work!"

"I need no confession from your lips. With Dallas Sheridan you made your home amid the mountain wilds of California. Your neighbors were savages and wild beasts. Of the former, one—a half-blood—saw the quarrel. He looked calmly on and saw you stab to the heart the man you had ruined and deceived. You knew he saw you, but you bribed him to be silent."

The woman's face was pale as death.

"Lies, lies—all lies!" she panted. "Where is this half-blood?"

"He is at the door!"

They turned toward the open doorway, and there stood Injun Jim, his arms folded across his breast.

With a gasping moan, Delva Murella recoiled, her hands trembling, her eyes fastened on the form of the Indian.

Harvey Klaw looked on in breathless excitement.

"You see the evidence is complete," came coldly from Sam Sheridan's lips. "I have all the proof that can be asked for."

"What do you propose to do?" she faintly asked.

"Bring you to justice! I did think of avenging my brother with my own hands, but I have changed my mind. You shall be tried legally."

A flush of hope returned to her.

"You will never find a jury to convict me," she declared.

"Then I will do the work of vengeance! I scarcely look on you as a woman—you are a devil in human form! I have you fast, and you shall not escape me!"

"Don't be so sure of that!" she cried, and like a flash, she sprung forward and dashed out the light. The detective made a move to prevent her act, but was too late.

A cry of mortal agony was heard in the darkness, and a dark figure brushed like a shadow past the Indian near the doorway.

CHAPTER X.

THE HERMIT'S LAST WORDS.

WHAT had happened?

Sam Sheridan asked himself the question. He had heard the cry of pain, after which there was a heavy fall. He stood still for a moment, and when he stepped forward, he nearly fell over a figure that lay on the floor.

The chimney of the lamp had been smashed, but the lamp itself was not damaged. This he found and lighted.

The flaring, unsteady light showed him a form on the floor—the form of Harvey Klaw! The hermit groaned as Sam bent over him, lamp in hand.

"What's the matter?" asked the detective.

"I'm done for!" was the faint reply. "She stabbed me in the darkness! Where has she gone?"

Delva Murella, the Woman of the Crimson Hands, was not in the room. She had vanished,

and the half-blood, Injun Jim, was gone from the door!

"She has escaped from the room," said Sam; "but the Indian is on her track. Where are you cut?"

He dropped on his knees by the wounded man's side and made a hasty examination. A glance was sufficient to show him Harvey Klaw was really wounded unto death.

"It is bad," came soberly from the Government Detective's lips, as his nimble fingers tore shreds from Klaw's clothing and stanching the flow of blood. "Why did she do this?"

"I don't know," huskily moaned the unfortunate wretch.

"What did you do when she extinguished the light?"

"Sprung to my feet."

"That explains it."

"How?"

"She expected I would attempt to capture her, and when you leaped up, you were taken for me. She intended to finish me with the stroke of the knife."

"My God!" groaned Klaw. "I am not ready to die! Do you think there is no hope for me?"

"I should say your minutes were numbered."

"I feel it!"

"Still, there may possibly be a chance for you. I will go to Early Bird for a physician."

But this caused the wounded man to start up in alarm, crying:

"No, no; do not leave me! I would be dead when you return! I cannot die here all alone! I have much to say before I die! Oh, I must talk!"

"If you have a great deal to say, you had not better lose any time about it."

"I understand you," came huskily from Klaw's lips. "It is a terrible thing to face death so suddenly—a horrible thing! I have thought I did not fear to die; but I do—I do!"

Something like a shudder ran over Sam Sheridan. It was the same old story. He had seen half a score of men die who in life had regarded death with utter disdain; but when they came to face the grim monster, their nerve deserted them and they pleaded that they were not ready to die.

"What were your relations with this woman?" asked the detective.

"She was nothing to me outside of business. She brought the child—Vira—to me, and I took charge of the girl. I was to make Vira believe I was her father. I knew she had kidnapped the girl, but long years ago I committed a crime that caused me to change my name, and I did not pry into the affairs of Delva. It would not be healthy for any man to do that."

A strange look had settled on Sam Sheridan's face, and there was a light of eagerness in his eyes. Evidently he believed the revelation of the dying man would be of interest.

"Go on!" he commanded, holding himself in restraint.

"My real name is John Pixton, and—"

"Then you are the man I have been looking for for years!"

The wounded hermit started and looked searchingly at the ferret.

"Looking for me? Why?"

"I knew my brother's child had been placed in your charge—in the charge of John Pixton."

"From what you said to-night—what passed between you and Delva Murella—I learned for the first time the name of the child and who was her father. The Woman of the Crimson Hands did not tell me that part of the secret—she did not trust me fully."

"Treacherous as a snake herself, she feared treachery in others!"

"I suppose so. She made me promise to bring the child up aright, and I have done so. Hermit though I have become, I am a man of education, and Vira has received the benefit of such instruction as her mind was ready to receive. But she chafed under my restraint. She longed for greater freedom, and she feared Dave Murella."

"Dave Murella? Who is he?"

"Dapper Davy, sport and desperado."

"Yes," came grimly from Sam's lips; "I think I owe him something. But what relation is he to the Woman of the Crimson Hands?"

"Her own brother."

"Impossible! She had no brother, to my knowledge."

"This man passes as her brother. If he is not that, he must be her husband."

"I begin to understand why his bullet knocked me over last night. But, go on."

Sam saw the man's strength was failing, and he brought John Pixton some water, which was eagerly swallowed.

"Dapper Davy has done most of the business for Delva Murella," continued the wounded man. "He it was who usually made the payments which came from her, and he kept watch of me while she was far away. I think he meant to marry the girl, some day. Delva often spoke of a sweet revenge, and it must have been that she meant."

"It is like her!" and the detective showed his white teeth. "She is one of Satan's choice tools!"

"My nephew, who is known in Early Bird as Easy Ned, loved Vira—still loves her. He wished to marry her—wanted to ask her to have him; but when I spoke of it to Dapper Davy, the little imp laughed and said he would strangle the girl with his own hands before Ned should have her."

"I could not tell this to Ned, but I held him in check—I would not allow him to speak of love to Vira. He could not understand it, and there have been hard feelings between us. He held the secret of my crime, and once he tried to terrify me by threatened disclosure; but he did not mean it, for Ned is at heart a really good boy—a good boy. My God! I shall never see him again!"

Sam had placed a rolled coat under Pixton's head, and made the dying man as comfortable as possible. Pixton covered his face with his hands, and a tear trickled down between his fingers, to fall and mingle with his blood on the floor.

"Don't think of that now," urged the detective. "Hurry on with what you have to say."

"All right," agreed the stricken wretch, huskily. "After all, it's not so very much. If Vira is ever found—"

"Ever found? What do you mean?"

"Don't you know she has been taken away, or has left me of her own accord?"

"I know nothing of it. Tell me all."

Pixton did so.

"Too bad!" muttered Sam, when the explanation was made. "You do not think she was kidnapped?"

"I don't know. I have thought it possible she ran away to escape Dapper Davy, whom she hated. I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"That you will try to find her."

"I readily promise that."

"And that, if you find her alive, you will tell her I really loved her. It is true, sir; I learned to love the girl, and her disappearance has wrung my heart. She was almost like my own child. If I was ever harsh to her, I was simply obeying orders from Delva Murella, or was doing what I considered for the best. You will tell her all this?"

"If I find her—yes."

"Don't forget." Then Pixton closed his eyes and lay panting and breathless, while his life swiftly slipped away. After giving him time to rest, Sam asked:

"If the girl was kidnapped, who could have done the job?"

Something like a smile passed over Pixton's face.

"Down in Early Bird they say it was Captain Blood," was his reply.

"And Dapper Davy accused me of being Captain Blood. I have the mark [of his bullet along the side of my head."

"Then you are the one of whom I heard so much to-day? You escaped from the jail last night?"

"I was assisted to escape."

"Do you swear you are a detective?"

"I give you my word of honor. You should have no doubts of me after hearing what passed while the Woman of the Crimson Hands was here."

"That is true—that is true! But, my mind seems clouded, and it is getting hard for me to think. How fearfully dark it is in this room! And it is darker in Vira's room beyond that door! Poor little Vira! She is gone, and the room is empty! I used to hear her singing there, after she had kissed me good-night. She did kiss me, though I never compelled her to do so. She was good and gentle. I wish she were here that I might ask her forgiveness."

"Do you think Captain Blood really had anything to do with the abduction?"

Again that queer look passed over Pixton's face, but when he tried to speak, his voice had sunk to an inarticulate murmur. Secret Service Sam saw his span of life had all but reached the very end, and he hastened to revive him with a few drops from a flask of whisky.

"I'm going!" whispered Pixton, his fingers grasping aimlessly at the empty air.

"Tell me if you think Captain Blood had any-

thing to do with the disappearance of my brother's child?"

"He did not."

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

"How can you be sure? Man, can you tell me anything of Blood?"

"What do you wish to know?"

"Almost anything may be of importance to me. You are dying, and I do not mind telling you it was Captain Blood's capture that caused the United States Government to send me as a special detective into this section. You know he is a counterfeiter, or is at the head of a gang that manufactures the 'queer.' There is a lot of bogus stuff afloat in this section, and I believe the retreat of the coiners must be near at hand."

"And you are pretty—near right. I can tell you—"

"This Dapper Davy is not Captain Blood?" asked Sam, as the dying hermit paused for want of breath.

"No; but he knows the chief—I am sure. I have heard—enough to—know that. I think I can—tell you—who—Captain Blood—is."

"Then tell me quickly!—What is that?"

The detective leaped to his feet and wheeled toward the door. As he did so, a number of faces were revealed by the dim light of a lamp, and he saw several men crowding to the door. At the head of the party was Dapper Davy, and the little sport cried triumphantly:

"There he is!—that's the dog! Seize him!"

A brace of revolvers appeared in Sam Sheridan's hands, and they were turned on the men.

"Chain up a bit!" he commanded. "If you hurry this seizure too rapidly, I shall have to call a few of you down. What do you want?"

"We want you."

"For what?"

"Well, say for your latest murder. There is your victim on the floor, and we have captured you red-handed. Whether you are Captain Blood or not, this job is enough to swing you. You have killed Harvey Klaw!"

"I fancy you know you are lying. But, as Mr. Klaw is able, I will let him inform you whether I did the job or not."

"He is dead!" cried Dapper Davy.

"That is where you are mistaken," declared Sam, turning toward the prostrate hermit.

But John Pixton was dead!

CHAPTER XI.

ESCAPE—JIM'S STORY.

THE hermit of the Shelf had breathed his last just as the crowd appeared at the cabin door, and Secret Service Sam realized he was in a tight corner. Still, his nerve did not desert him in the least.

Major Selban Hunter pressed his way forward from the crowd.

"If the man is not dead, he can easily settle this point," said the magnate.

"I was mistaken," confessed the cool detective; "he is dead."

At this, Dapper Davy uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"I knew it!" cried the little sport. "This whelp was only giving us a stiff bluff. He knew Klaw was dead all the time."

A sound that was like a laugh and yet was not a laugh came from Sam Sheridan's lips.

"I would like to ask you a question, my sportive friend," he said.

"We have no time to waste with you," sneered Davy.

"Oh, yes you have!" contradicted the detective, as he handled his revolvers in a very significant manner. "You have lots of time—lots of it."

The gambler's eyes flashed.

"There are a score of us," was his assertion; "while you are but one man."

"If there were a hundred of you, it would make no difference," Sam retorted. "I am here, and I have my guns ready. You cannot come through that door so very fast—that is, not so very much faster than I can pull the trigger. I am very handy when it comes to shooting, and I do not waste more than three-thirds of my bullets."

At this moment, there was a stir on the outer edge of the throng, and Easy Ned came elbowing his way to the front, a hard look on his usually handsome face.

"What is this I hear?" he demanded. "Harvey Klaw dead?"

"And there is the man who killed him!" asserted Dapper Davy, pointing accusingly at Secret Service Sam.

The eyes of the detective and the tall sport met.

"Did you do this?" asked Ned, pointing to the body of the dead man.

"I did not," was the quiet but firm assertion. Still Easy Ned eyed Sam, as if to read the whole truth in his face.

"If you did," said the brown-bearded sport, "you are my meat! Although I have never acknowledged it before, this man is my uncle. That makes me his avenger."

Dapper Davy gave vent to his surprise and disgust at the turn of affairs.

"This is an outrage in which all Early Bird is concerned," the little gambler snapped; "and therefore we are all the avengers of Harvey Klaw. How do we know he is your uncle?"

There was a dangerous look on Ned's face, as he turned on the speaker.

"Do you think it healthy to call me a liar?" he asked, his manner being extremely frigid.

"Who is calling you a liar?"

"You are doing as much! You are smaller than I, but—"

"Never mind that!" was flashed in return.

"If you want a quarrel, wade right in! I will give you a very interesting time, and you can shove up your wealth on that! I have known for some time that you had a grudge against me, and right now is your occasion to do your pretty!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" cried Major Hunter, stepping forward; "you must not quarrel now! Have a little judgment! There is another affair that demands our attention."

"That's so!" shouted several of the crowd.

Sam had improved the few moments during which attention had been turned from him, and he had carefully taken in the entire room. A few steps to one side brought him close to the table on which sat the lamp, and a window was near at his left.

"He's tryin' ter sneak!" yelled one. "Let all make a rush!"

"It will be the sorriest rush of your life," assured the detective, his revolvers staring at them. "Come right in, if you feel like having a great burying day in Early Bird to-morrow."

"This is all bluff!" sneered Dapper Davy.

"You shall be the first man I shall spot, Dave Murella."

The small sport fell back.

"Dave Murella!" he echoed.

"By that I mean you!" assured Sam. "I am getting your record down, and I think you will soon be on the list of much-wanted men."

"Well, this is rich stuff to come from the lips of Captain Blood, the outlaw!"

"I am no friend of yours, and Captain Blood is your friend. I am a stranger in Early Bird, but if the town knew the whole truth, they would stand in with me. You are the man who should be lynched to the nearest tree!"

"Easy, easy!" broke in Major Hunter, who felt it was high time for him to show his authority. "This has been carried quite far enough! What does all this bandying of words amount to, may I ask? Sir, we know Dapper Davy, and we do not know you. That makes a great deal of difference—a large amount. If you will quietly give yourself up—"

"Which you may rest assured I will not. I wonder if I look like the big fool you seem to take me for? I know enough about the average run of mining-camps not to get myself into the hands of a mob of men who are thirsting for a sensation in the way of a lynching."

"I assure you of my protection."

"That does not go a little distance with me, major. I had your assurance last night, but had I not escaped from the jail as I did, I would be a dead man to-day."

"You have the lives of the two guards to answer for. That is enough, even though you had not killed Harvey Klaw."

"Major, I must have the pleasure of telling you just what I think of you. I believe you are an unmitigated hypocrite—a double-faced dastard!"

The major was aghast.

"You cursed impudent whelp!" he finally stammered. "That shall cost you dear! At him, boys!"

And then came a commotion on the outskirts of the mob. Men were sent right and left by sturdy arms, and, yelling like a madman, Injun Jim came plunging toward the magnate of Early Bird.

"The time has come!" screamed the half-blood. "The Red Rose shall be avenged! Jim will have the blood of the double-face!"

Just as the pompous major recoiled with a cry of fear, Sam Sheridan dashed out the light.

"He cannot get out of the room!" cried Dapper Davy. "We have him trapped!"

A crash of glass followed, and a human figure went through the cabin window!

Davy knew the detective was escaping, and he took two snap-shots in the direction of the window, hoping to hit and disable Sam.

He was not successful.

The detective alighted on his feet and immediately vanished in the darkness. A short distance away, he suddenly turned back, remembering the man who had befriended him, Injun Jim.

"I must not leave the half-breed," he said. "Jim befriended me, and now I must stand by him. I will go back."

"White pard need not go back," said a familiar voice, and a dark form appeared before him. "Jim is here."

"Good!" exclaimed the Government Detective, grasping the hand of his friend. "It suddenly occurred to me you were in a tight place. Did you down Major Hunter?"

"The double-face escaped. I did not find him in the dark. But for him the end is at hand."

"Your hatred for him is intense."

"It is like the hatred of light toward darkness. But come, white pard; the wolves are howling."

"Hear them!" laughed Sam. "They evidently feel very bad."

The yells of the baffled mob made the night air hideous. The men of Early Bird were wild with fury.

"They will scatter and search," said Jim. "We must not remain here."

He led the way into the darkness, and Sam Sheridan followed, trusting everything to the half-blood. An hour later they were reclining at the mouth of a small cave far up the side of the mountain that towered above the little mining-town. Within the cave the remains of a fire still smoldered.

This was Injun Jim's retreat.

"Why is it you hate Major Hunter so intensely?" asked the detective, as he filled and lighted his pipe.

Jim was silent so long that Sam felt constrained to say:

"You need not unbosom your secret, if you do not wish, partner. I have no desire to pry into affairs that you may desire to keep secret; but your antipathy toward the man has aroused my curiosity."

"Jim has never talked of it much. In his heart there is a grave, and the Red Rose is buried there. To speak of this seems like lifting the sods from the grave."

"Then do not speak of it, my friend. I regret I reverted to the subject."

For half an hour they were silent. From his position, Sam could look down on the town far below and see the twinkling lights which seemed winking at him. The wind was moaning in the gorges, and there was a feeling of dampness in the air.

Suddenly Jim, who had been lying at full length on the ground, sat up.

"Do you hear how the wind cries out away down there?" he asked. "That is like her voice—like the dying moans of the Red Rose! You are a pale-face, and I am of your race, as well as of the red-men. I wonder if you can understand me? Sometimes I think there was never in all the space of time another like Jim. I do not understand myself. There are days when I feel I am a red-man; then comes times when all in me is of the pale-faces. It is strange."

"The Red Rose was an Indian maiden—the daughter of a chief. Jim loved her, and she loved Jim. But the white man came. The chief, father of the Red Rose, loved horses and weapons and bright trinkets. He was a fool! He sold the Rose for them, and the double-face bought her!"

"Jim was poor, and he was looked upon with scorn, for he was neither red nor white. But he loved the Red Rose, and his heart was hot when the white man robbed him of her. What could he do?"

The half-blood paused, as if waiting for an answer to the question, but Sam remained silent. He did not choose to say anything just then.

After a time, Jim resumed:

"Perhaps it was evil; but Jim could not see it so. He followed the white double-face, and he found that after a time, the one who had bought the Red Rose made her his slave—his dog! He kicked her, he cursed her, he beat her! Now I do not seem to you like a red-skin, for you know many red-men treat their squaws thus. Well, now it is that I may be more like the whites, for my heart was burning with fury. I thought to kill the double-face, but my hand was held by a power I could not see. I waited,

and I learned he had more wives than the Red Rose.

"Then I went to her, and I tried to take her from him. She would not go. It was impossible to bring her to go with me. At last, I carried her away against her will!"

"In the heart of the mountains, we lived as happy as the birds, for the Rose soon forgot him. She only cared for me all the time. But the double-face had not forgotten her, and the black day came."

Again the half-blood paused, and Sam could hear him breathing hoarsely in the darkness. When he went on again, his voice was full of suppressed passion.

"He found her when I was far away. He came with a band of coyotes like himself. He tried to drag her away. She fought them all, and she killed one of the dogs. Then the double-face shot her down, and they left her lying for dead."

She was not dead. When I came back in the night, I heard her moaning like the wind down there. There was life enough in her to tell me the story, and then she was dead in my arms!

"Did I take the trail? Yes! But the wolf was cunning, and he covered his tracks. I lost him, but I never gave over the hunt. Now I have found him. I will not lose him again! He dies when next we meet!"

CHAPTER XII.

PRISONERS.

OVERPOWERED, bound, gagged, blindfolded and dragged down into the dark recesses of an underground retreat.

Such was the fate that befell Harold Dustan and Vira Sheridan, to call the girl by her right name.

The young man made a brave and desperate fight, but he was outnumbered and overpowered.

When the bonds and blindfold was removed, he found himself in a cavern-like place, which was lighted by a lamp that swung from the rocks above his head.

He heard the clang of a door and the sliding of rusty bolts, and then he felt he was a prisoner, alone in that dismal place. However, it was some time before he gathered energy enough to sit up and look around him.

His jaws ached, and his freed fingers soon removed the gag.

"Well, this is a pretty howdy-do!" he muttered, when he was able to speak. "I don't know as I am particularly delighted with the outcome of my little adventure! I am feeling very brilliant, I don't think!"

Having relieved himself in a measure by giving utterance to this bit of slang, he proceeded to inspect his surroundings, aided by the light of the swinging lamp.

"This looks like part of a mine," he said. "I am sure it is not a natural cave."

After making a further survey, he came to the conclusion that he was really in an old mine.

"I wonder how far they brought us after we were secured and blindfolded?" he muttered, standing with his hand to his head. "It seems to me as if it were a long distance, but I am not sure. The blows which I received on my head dazed me, and I cannot be sure of anything, except that I am in a bad scrape."

"I wonder where Miss Vira is. If they harm that girl, I will—"

He paused, one hand being uplifted and clinched and a fierce look resting on his handsome face.

"What can I do?" finally fell from his lips. "I am helpless! Of course those devils left me no chance of escape. They have made everything secure, I know that well enough without making an examination, but still I will inspect the place thoroughly. I could not rest easy if I didn't."

He first examined the heavy iron-bound door, but it did not take long to convince him that it was doubly secured. In the door was an opening, which he imagined was for the purpose of admitting food to any unfortunate who might happen to be a captive within the dungeon chamber.

Then he passed all around the walls.

On three sides lay the solid rock; but when he came to the fourth, he found a grated opening. He peered through the apertures between the stout iron bars, and a soft exclamation of surprise broke from his lips when he found himself looking into another chamber that was almost the exact counterpart of the one he was in.

What was that?

On a low couch lay a form, at sight of which his heart leaped into his throat.

Could it be—Vira?

It was a female—that was certain; but her face was turned away, and she seemed sleeping.

Harold scarcely breathed, as he continued to watch the figure on the couch. The light was not very strong within the adjoining chamber, and so he waited for the unknown to turn her head.

At length, a low moan came to his ears. A few seconds later, the very thing for which he waited occurred.

"Vira—Miss Klaw!"

He could not repress the cry.

She started and looked around.

"Who called my name?" she faintly asked.

"I did, Miss Klaw," replied the captive beyond the iron bars.

"But I cannot see any one."

"Still, I am here."

"The voice sounds like that of Mr. Dustan."

"Dustan is my name."

With an evident effort, she sat up, pressing her hands to her head.

"Oh, my poor head!" she cried. "It feels so strangely! What is the matter? It is whizzing like a railroad train and I can scarcely see."

"I passed through the same experience a few moments ago," assured Harold. "You will be all right presently."

"But where are you?" she asked, starting to her feet.

"Come this way, and you will be able to see me."

She did as instructed, and they were soon face to face, with only the iron bars between them.

"So near, and yet so far!" murmured Harold.

"What has happened to us?" asked Vira, in a dazed manner. "I do not understand it! Where are we?"

"We are captives."

"Where?"

"Somewhere underground. That is as much as I can tell you, for those fellows nearly knocked the lining out of my head. I am still dazed."

"And I—I must have fainted."

"Probably."

"But who are these men?"

"Outlaws, without a doubt."

"My goodness! what an adventure! It is really getting serious—very much so!"

"Distressingly so!"

"Is there no way of escape?"

"I am not able to answer for you, but I must confess, as far as I am concerned, I am here tight and fast. I have examined the entire place, and I am sure I cannot get out by any effort of my own."

"Oh, Mr. Dustan! It is too bad that I should get you into such trouble!"

"You—you get me into the trouble?"

"Yes."

"Great Scott! Has this unfortunate affair really turned your head! How did you get me into the trouble?"

"By running away."

Harold whistled.

"Is that the way you look at it?"

"Yes. If I had remained at home, you would not have searched for me; and if you had not searched for me, you would not have fallen into the hands of these horrid, horrid men!"

"If you had remained at home, I would not have experienced the pleasure of that little feast in the forest glade. That more than repaid me for anything that may come of it."

"Now that is simply a gallant speech. I fear it does not come from your heart."

"And I assure you solemnly on my honor, it does come from my heart. My greatest regret is that you should have been thus unfortunate in falling into the hands of wicked and unprincipled men."

"I thank you," she said, simply, thrusting her hand through the bars.

Her fingers were warmly clasped by Harold, and he gave them a gentle pressure that brought some of the color back to her wan face.

"Miss Klaw."

"Mr. Dustan."

"There is something I wish to say to you. I trust you will pardon me for taking such an occasion to express myself. The first time I saw you I was impressed by your face and your charmingly natural and unaffected manner. It was almost a case of love at first sight, but—"

"Not quite! Oh, Mr. Dustan, how do you think a girl can accept such a declaration as that! You started in first-rate, but you have made a bad turn." And she laughed in order to cover the sudden emotion that had seized upon her. In her bosom her heart was fluttering like a caged wild-bird.

Harold remained sober.

"You must not think I am trifling, Miss Klaw," he said. "I am in earnest, and I love you. I am sure of it, for what we have passed through has revealed to me the secret of my heart. I wonder if you care anything for me in return?"

She was silent. Her head drooped till her face was veiled by a shadow. He felt her hand trembling in his grasp, and she sought to withdraw it, but he still held it secure.

"Please tell me!" he entreated. "Let me know the truth! Speak, Viral! What shall it be?"

She lifted her head.

"I am afraid it will be a broken arm, if you do not release my hand," she laughed. "See what a fearfully awkward position you are keeping me in!"

"I beg your pardon!" and he was forced to relinquish those soft fingers, while he joined in her laughter. "I did not realize what I was doing."

"And I fear you did not realize what you were saying. Wait—think it over. We are captives here, and we may not be able to escape—we may not be rescued."

"I fear there is little chance of that; but I have a hope that the outlaws will release me. I know not why they should keep me a prisoner. If I am set free, then I will find a way to save you. I swear it!"

"I believe and trust you."

"That is all I ask. Don't get down-hearted, for fortune will not entirely desert us, I am sure."

"Oh, I will be brave."

"That is right. I think I know pretty well where we are. If so, I understand why I was made a captive. It was for the purpose of closing my mouth, although I had promised secrecy. If I am right, and if I ever do get free, something will drop with a dull and sickening thud!"

He was very much in earnest.

"If we were only armed—" began Viral.

"Hush! I will tell you a secret. In my sleeve there is concealed a small derringer. It is true the weapon holds but a single shot, but that bullet may open the way to liberty. The outlaws did not find it when they relieved me of my other weapons. In case of emergency—Hark! Some one is coming!"

Footsteps sounded just beyond the iron-bound door.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHECKED BY A BULLET.

THE steps they heard were those of a guard who was making a round of inspection. He glanced into the chambers where the captives were confined, and then went away.

Later, food was brought to both of the unfortunates, and, despite their unpleasant situation, they ate heartily.

They spent a great deal of time conversing through the bars that separated them.

Time passed slowly, and they had no means of keeping count of the hours.

At length the bolts of the door of Harold's chamber were thrown back, the door swung open, and a man entered. He was dressed in black from hat to boots, and his features were concealed by a black cloth, through which eye-holes had been cut.

The door closed behind this man, and the prisoner heard some one on the outer side make it secure.

"I am Captain Blood," declared the mask, in a hoarse and muffled voice.

"I can't say I am delighted to see you," coolly retorted the young man.

"I did not expect you to be, so I am not disappointed."

"Why have you made me your prisoner?" asked Harold.

"I had a good reason for doing so."

"What reason?"

"I must decline to answer the question."

"You dare not answer it!" was the bold assertion.

"Well, that is rather brash, young fellow!" exclaimed the counterfeiter chief. "You do not seem to realize your position. You had better restrain your tongue!"

At this, Harold laughed shortly.

"Do you want me to bow down before you? If you do, you will be disappointed. I am not that kind of a chicken, Captain Blood. What is more natural than that I should resent the indignity heaped upon me? I have never harmed you in any way, and yet your tools make me a captive and shut me up in this wretched hole. I don't like it, sir!"

It was the outlaw's turn to laugh.

"Well," he confessed, "I did not really expect you would like it, and I can't say I blame you. But you should remember the old saw, 'what can't be cured must be endured.' That is the best advice I can give you."

"And that is the most agreeable! What do you propose to do with me?"

"Well, I have not decided that point. I will see you again and let you know about it."

"When will you see me again?"

"Oh, it may be to-morrow, or it may be a week from now."

"And meanwhile I must remain a captive in this wretched hole?"

"That is about the size of it."

"What have I done to deserve this?"

"It is not so much what you have done as what you might do."

Harold pretended not to understand this, and the outlaw declined to explain.

"But the young lady in the other chamber," said the ex-foreman. "What of her?"

"I am about to see her."

"Do you intend to keep her a captive?"

"That is none of your business, young man."

"So? Well, now, I do not agree with you."

"What is she to you?"

"A friend."

"You must have made rapid way in your friendship, for you only met her once before my men found you in her company."

"You seem to be well posted, captain."

"That is all right. There is not much that goes on without my knowledge."

"Are you the fellow they had locked in the jail at Early Bird, last night?"

"You ask too many questions, young man. I did not come here to be questioned."

"Then I'm hanged if I can see what you did come here for!"

"I wished to take a look at you to see if my men had made no mistake."

"Then they were instructed to make me a prisoner?"

"There you go with your questions! Give your tongue a rest, and see if it will not surprise it."

"You should not object to my talk, Captain Blood, for you see I get very little chance to converse with such an agreeable gentleman as yourself since I have been incarcerated in this old mine."

"Mine?"

"Yes. Isn't this a mine?"

"It is a natural cavern."

"This portion of it is not natural, by any means."

"This portion I had excavated for the purpose it is now serving. The rest of the place is just as it was made by the hand of nature."

Harold did not contradict the chief, but he felt sure Blood was deliberately lying. However, he saw no reason why he should bring on a quarrel, and he thought it might be best if the outlaw thought him deceived.

"I see you are all right," said the mask; "so I will leave you."

He retreated to the door, and for a moment, Harold was tempted to make a break for liberty. He felt sure he could overpower the chief, but when he remembered the unseen person or persons who had fastened the door behind Captain Blood, he restrained himself.

"Another time!" he thought. "It would be folly now."

He was right.

Captain Blood left the chamber, and the door was closed and made secure behind him. A minute later, he entered the chamber where the girl was confined.

"Ah, my dear," he said, approaching Viral, who had risen and was standing before him; "how are you feeling?"

The girl's eyes flashed and her hands were clinched.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I am Captain Blood."

"I thought as much!"

What an unlimited amount of scorn there was in that simple exclamation. The outlaw seemed to feel it, and he visibly recoiled a bit, flashing:

"You have a cutting tongue, girl!"

"Indeed!"

"I have come to bring you sad news."

She did not question him, therefore he added: "Harvey Klaw is dead."

She started toward him, clasping her hands over her heart and crying:

"My father—dead? No, no, no! It is not true—it cannot be! You are not telling the truth! Why should you tell me this?"

"It is true Harvey Klaw is dead. He was

stabbed last night—for it is now morning—he has been buried. You will never see Harvey Klaw again."

Her grief was overwhelming.

"Great Heaven!" she groaned, nearly sinking to the rocky floor. "What a wicked creature I am! I deserted him—ran away and left him! And now he is dead! He was always kind—almost always! I am sure he loved me, and I—I believe I cared for him more than I knew! Dead, dead! Never see him again! My poor, poor father!"

"Do not take on so, girl," fell from the hidden lips of Captain Blood. "Harvey Klaw was not your father."

She started back and stared at him in wild-eyed amazement.

"What is that you say?" she almost shrieked. "Not my father? You must be mad!"

"It is true," he assured. "He was simply hired to take care of you. Have you never suspected he might not be your father?"

"Yes, yes! But are you sure there is no mistake? Did he confess he was not my father? Tell me—tell me all!"

"There is no need of a confession. You know Dapper Davy?"

A look of fear fell on her face.

"Yes. What of him? Do not tell me that creature has any claim on me! I will not believe it!"

"Then I will not tell you so; but Davy knew all along that Harvey Klaw was not your father."

Viral staggered to the couch and sunk down, bursting into a sudden flood of tears.

"This is so terrible!" she moaned.

Captain Blood came close to her side.

"Do not take on so!" he entreated. "I know you feel as if you were alone in the world, but in me you have a friend—a true friend."

She fell back and stared at him through her tears.

"You my friend! No, no!"

"I speak the truth, I am ready and willing to protect you. I have loved you for some time, and, nameless though you are, I will make you my wife."

She leaped to her feet and sprung from him.

"Your wife!" she echoed. "You must think me a fool! Why, I would sooner wed a serpent! I would as soon become the wife of Dapper Davy, and I hate him with all my heart. No, I will never become that!"

He laughed, triumphantly.

"By Jove!" he cried; "you are a beauty! Never before in all your life have you looked so beautiful as at this moment! You certainly shall become Mrs. Blood!"

"Never!"

"You forget you are in my power."

That seemed to stagger her; but again she declared:

"I will be nothing to you—never your wife!"

"If you do not consent to become my wife in a respectable manner, you shall become something worse. You shall be mine anyway, and I leave you to choose whether you will have my name or not!"

"Devil!"

"I like your spirit, but you will come round. I am sorry I am not able to kiss you without removing this covering for my face. As it is, I will have to content myself with an embrace."

A shriek broke from her lips, as he leaped forward to catch her in his arms.

"Harold!" she screamed. "Save me, Harold!"

Through the grating between the two chambers spurted a spout of flame. A pistol-shot echoed along the underground corridors, and, flinging up his arms, Captain Blood fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER XIV.

FACING DEATH.

HAROLD DUSTAN had used the derringer which the outlaws had overlooked, and, with the single shot at his command, had dropped the desperado chief.

Viral stood staring down at the fallen man, seeming like one turned to stone. She could scarcely understand what had happened.

"Viral—Viral!" called the young man beyond the grating. "You are saved from him, the miserable wretch! Come here, darling!—come to these bars! I want you near me! Oh, if I might get in there to you! They should never lay a hand on you so long as I could draw a breath!"

Weak and blind, sick at heart, the girl staggered toward the grating.

"Oh, Harold!" she gasped; "what have you done!"

"Killed that vile dog!" was his reply. "It was an easier death than he merited!"

"But—you—you have no other shots!"

"Unfortunately not."

"Great Heaven! Think what you have done! He is Captain Blood, chief of the outlaws! The fury of his followers will know no bounds! They will rend you! They will be like so many wild beasts! Oh, Harold, Harold! that you should do this—for me!"

"For you I am ready to do anything! Don't you believe me now when I tell you I love you? You must believe!"

"I do! I do!"

"My precious darling! And you love me in return?"

"With all my heart, Harold, my king!"

He had reached through the bars and clasped her hand with one of his—her small trembling hand. He held it tight, almost crushing the slender fingers, but she minded not the pain—she was not conscious of pain.

"How happy I am!" he breathed, his eyes fixed upon her pale face. "Oh, if I only had a show, I could defend you against a score!"

A harsh laugh startled them. Vira wheeled, and Harold turned his eyes toward the spot from whence the sound came. Then a shriek broke from the girl's lips, and she leaned weakly against the wall.

Captain Blood was not dead.

He had partially arisen, and was glaring toward them, his eyes gleaming through the twin holes in the sable mask.

"Well, this is fine!" he snarled. "I see the claws of my captives were not properly clipped. Well, I think I will attend to the clipping next time."

Then he struggled to his feet, getting up with some difficulty.

At the same instant, excited voices were heard outside the underground cells, and some one at the door cried out:

"What has happened, captain? What was the meaning of that shot?"

"It came from the prisoner in cell 3," answered Blood. "He was not properly disarmed. Go in there and take away his weapons at once."

The order was promptly obeyed, the heavy door of Harold's cell swinging open and four men springing in. The young man knew it was folly to resist, for, should he overpower all four of his foes, without doubt others were close at hand to answer a call.

"What do you want?" he calmly asked.

"Any weapon you may have," was the reply.

He held out the derringer.

"Here it is."

It was taken from him, then he was seized and searched with the utmost care.

No other weapon was found.

"That is all," he assured.

"And you will be sorry you had that, or I'm a fool," declared one of the men.

With that they retired from the cell, closing and securing the iron-bound door.

Meantime, holding his hand to his side, Captain Blood had approached the girl-captive, who shrunk away before him, horror depicted on her face.

"You little fool!" came harshly from the lips of the counterfeiter chief. "What are you afraid of? You make me angry by your silly fear! I will not harm you. You are far too pretty for me to think of injuring you. I mean to keep you to become a pleasant companion for me."

She flung herself on her knees at his feet, her hands outstretched in despair and appeal.

"Kill me!" she begged—"kill me, rather than make me that! I choose death a thousand times!"

"I have always said pretty heads contained the least brains, and this proves it. You don't know what you are talking about! Do you fancy you love that worthless devil in the other cell? Well, you may as well forget he ever existed, for he has sealed his own doom! I did not think of cutting him off in the blush of youth, but he tried to kill me. I think I have his bullet in my side."

"I would to God you had it in your black heart!"

The mask actually laughed.

"Now you are showing your spirit, my pretty! By Jove! you are simply delicious! Those fair cheeks, those round, plump arms, those velvet lips—ah-a! they make you a prize to be treasured!"

She leaped to her feet, panting with sudden fury.

"Oh, you miserable cur!" she cried, facing

him. "You disgrace to manhood! What a low and contemptible thing you are! I loathe you! Do not think you will be able to make me anything to you, for I will find a way to take my own life, and thus I shall escape you!"

"That sounds fine," he said; "but you will change your mind, I fancy. Meanwhile, I shall have you closely watched, and I don't believe you will find means to carry out your desperate and silly purpose. I will see you again, by and by."

With no other parting words he retired from the cell, greatly to her relief.

As soon as Captain Blood's wound was examined and pronounced of slight consequence, the chief ordered Harold Dustan ironed and brought before him. The wound had been bandaged when the young man was dragged into the presence of the famous counterfeiter.

There were irons on the captive's wrists, but he showed no signs of fear, boldly facing the leader of the lawless men.

Captain Blood gazed in silence at Harold for some time, and then he said:

"You never made a bigger fool of yourself than when you fired that shot, young man. I had no desire to take your life, and you would have been set at liberty in time; but you have done something that cooks your goose."

"Do your worst!" was the defiant retort. "I simply tried to save a most unfortunate girl from the insults of a most dastardly cur!"

Blood started.

"You are rash!" came hoarsely from beneath the mask. "Well, it makes little difference, for you are to die anyway."

Harold said nothing in return, but he showed not a sign of quailing.

"I think you will cringe a little when it comes time to face your doom," spoke Captain Blood.

"If you think so, you are mistaken."

"You raised your hand against my life, and so I shall kill you myself."

"Then my death will be a shameful one, in one respect. I shall perish at the hand of a coward!"

Involuntarily, the chief took a step forward, his hands clinched, as if to strike the indiscreet captive. Harold did not recoil a hair.

"Strike!" he cried. "It will prove my words true!"

Captain Blood laughed and fell back.

"You have some nerve," he confessed. "You made an utter failure of your attempt to befriend Miss Klaw. When you are dead and rotting, she will be my wife or—my mistress!"

That cut the captive to the quick. Like a flash, he tried to break from the outlaws who held him.

"Let me get at the cursed dog!" he grated, his face white as that of a corpse. "I will brain him with these irons!"

Blood simply rested one hand on the butt of a revolver, awaiting the result of the struggle. Harold had little show, and he was subdued.

"If you had broken away," said the chief, "you would simply have compelled me to snuff you out a little sooner than I intend doing. I will give you twelve hours to live and prepare for death. At the expiration of that time, I intend to perform a little pistol practice on you. Take him away."

Harold was not returned to the cell where he could look in upon Vira, but was placed in a damp, dark hole and made fast with heavy chains.

Twelve hours later a dozen masked men had gathered in what seemed to be a portion of an old mine. Flaming torches thrust into a score of crevices illumined the strange scene. Captain Blood was there, and the others were his chosen followers.

At a signal, Harold Dustan was led forth, still heavily ironed.

"Make him fast to that wall there," commanded the counterfeiter chief.

Harold was locked to some staples in the black wall, and he stood defiantly facing the man who had elected himself as the prisoner's executor. Captain Blood drew and examined a revolver.

"Have you anything to say?" asked the chief.

"Nothing," was the firm reply, with no tremor of the voice. "I would be wasting my breath. Do your worst!"

Deliberately Blood lifted the revolver, taking careful aim at the breast of the helpless young man. He intended to send his first bullet straight through Harold's heart!

CHAPTER XV.

CULPEPPER BOB OF CUT-THROAT.

The sun was well up in the heavens when a solidly-built, red-headed and red-bearded man

rode a disreputable-appearing mule into the town of Early Bird. The man was a tough-looking customer, armed to the teeth.

"Whoa, Beduzer!" he roared, as he checked the mule in front of the Palace Saloon and glared around at the throng of men, who were still discussing the recent excitement. "W'ot th' hill-roarin' bedizzilum is all this congregatherin' erbout? 'Thar seems ter be somethin' o' a flut-teration in this yere burgh. Guv us a tip as ter ther meanin' o' ther racket, my roosters."

The throng surveyed the stranger, but no one offered him the information he sought.

"Wow!" he yelled, leaping from the mule and standing with his hands on his hips, while his gaze roved from one to the other of the crowd. "I'm Culpepper Bob o' Cut-throat Bend, an' I'm a he-howlin' horror on hot skids! Glance at me—then shiver!"

"Wal, we hain't inclined to shiver nary shiv," declared Hunk Riley, pushing his way forward. "W'ot ther blazes are you yowlin' round yere fer? Do you reckon on comin' inter this town an' settin' up fer a chief? Ef so, you've gotter climb me!"

Culpepper Bob laughed.

"You look like somebody'd bin climbin' yer with spikes in their shoes," he said.

Riley really did present a sorry appearance, his face being cut and bruised from his encounter in the saloon, and his eyes were red with the effect of indulgence in liquor.

Eben Sutton, the former foreman of the Gloriana, now pushed his way forward, and his appearance was not one whit less battered than that of his companion.

"Whut's ther critter sayin'?" asked Sutton. "Climb him, ef he gives yer any of his jaw, Riley!"

The two had become boon companions since the battle, which terminated in their punching and gouging each other till both were exhausted.

"You bet I will!" growled the Man from Denver.

Culpepper Bob laughed hoarsely, slapping his thigh with one hand.

"Ker-woof!" he snorted. "Heur that thar, will yer! Hyer's a pair o' twins, an' I kin knock ther packin' out o' all two both o' 'em!"

"W'at's that?" yelled Sutton.

"W'ot yer say!" shouted Riley.

"Go dig ther cotton out o' yer ears," advised Bob, a broad grin on his face. "I say I kin climb all over you two stiffs."

Both Riley and Sutton sprang forward, and the man from Cut-throat Bend was ready to meet them. Riley made a savage stroke at Bob's face, but the red-headed fellow dodged and countered. The delighted spectators heard the spat of a hard fist, as it landed on the neck of the bully.

It was a fearful blow, and Hunk Riley was fairly lifted off his feet and sent headlong to the ground.

Culpepper Bob was just in time to wheel on Sutton and parry a blow. Then he gave the ex-foreman his right, following it swiftly with a sledge-hammer left-hander.

Down went Sutton!

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the red-head. "That's jest like knockin' over chips! Ef ye've got anny more o' this yere kind, send 'em on."

A burst of applause came from the crowd, for never had any one present witnessed so neat a job.

But the affair was not over, by any means.

Riley and Sutton struggled to their feet, both looking dazed but savage.

"Some cuss hit me from behind!" snarled the Man from Denver. "It was no fair shake!"

"Ther critter hed a billy in his sleeve!" gurgled Sutton. "He guve me a belt with it!"

"You're both blamed beazly liars from clean up ther creek!" promptly declared Culpepper Bob. "I done ther job single-handed, an' I kin do it jest as fast as you kin walk up! Thet's w'at's ther matter with ole Hannah!"

That was enough. Again the two bullies made a dash for the stranger.

Bob met them squarely.

"Whoopee!" he screamed, as by some rapidly-performed tricked he kicked the feet from beneath both of his foes. "See them chaw dust!"

Planting a heavy boot against that portion of Riley's pantaloons on which the Denverite usually sat, he sent the "chief" sprawling, his nose plowing in the dirt.

Then the fighting stranger caught Sutton by the waist, lifted him easily and flung him over the mule's back. Eben struck the ground heavily and lay stunned.

Just as Riley was rising to his hands and knees, Bob's boot again struck him on the same

place, and he went sprawling on his face once more.

And then, as fast as Riley would attempt to arise, he would receive a kick that would send him down, while the crowd fairly roared with laughter.

Culpepper Bob followed his victim until Riley managed to scramble to his feet and fly, as if for his life. Then the man from Cut-throat Bend snatched out a revolver and sent some bullets whistling past the fugitive's ears, which greatly accelerated the speed of the downfallen "chief."

The spectators rushed forward as one man, all eager to grasp the hand of the stranger.

"Thunder an' tar!" squealed Sassafras Jack, reaching over the head of Sawed-off Simp and getting hold of Bob's hand first. "You're ther dandiest fighter I ever saw—you jest be!"

"That's so!" agreed Peaceful Pil, who had crept out from behind a box, where he had sought concealment at the beginning of the affray. "He kin lick the world!"

"You vas a Shim Dandy!" asserted Dutch Karl. "Come youreseluf mein skaloen in und I dreat you mit der pest I haf. No lonker dot Riley prances aroundt dis blace und calls outt vor der pest man in der town to knock der chip his shoulter off, I pelief!"

Culpepper Bob was fairly dragged into the saloon, every man insisting on standing treat.

"Come right into this place an' settle, pard," entreated Sassafras Jack. "We need sech as you."

Others added their appeals, and none of them noticed all the stranger's drinks were emptied into a sawdust-filled spittoon, instead of passing down his throat.

Culpepper Bob found it difficult to get away from the mob, but he finally succeeded in doing so. After that, he was seen talking earnestly with Easy Ned Lester.

Among those whom the man from Cut-throat sought in Early Bird was Major Selban Hunter; but the owner of the Gloriana Mine was not to be found, and no one seemed to know anything concerning his whereabouts.

There seemed to be something mysterious about Culpepper Bob's moves, and Dapper Davy regarded the man suspiciously.

"I wonder what kind of a lay he is on," muttered the little sport, to himself. "I feel like there was something in the air. I think I'll shadow the fellow."

He did so, but with poor success, being unable to find out the purpose of the red-head.

Meantime, Easy Ned was passing from one to another of the solid men of Early Bird, and with them all he had a few words to say in private. Dapper Davy was not mistaken in thinking there was "something in the air;" but, whatever that "something" was, it was kept secret so far as the rabble was concerned.

The day wore away, and the excitement subsided gradually. From time to time, small searching parties came in and reported themselves unsuccessful in finding a trace of the missing Vira Klaw.

Toward night Dapper Davy disappeared. No one seemed to know whither the little gambler had gone.

Darkness came.

A little party of men gathered by a riven boulder on the outskirts of Early Bird. There were between fifteen and twenty in all, and they moved and spoke with caution. Later, there would be a moon; but now the valley rested in deepest shadow.

For some time the small band of men waited by the boulder. They were all armed to the teeth, and some of them carried unlighted torches.

At length the figure of a man approached, and there was an exchange of signals. The man came boldly forward.

"Wa-al," he said, cautiously, "you're all hyer, be yer? Thet's ther kind! Ef we don't root out old Cap'n Blood before ther moon crawls over the peaks ter ther east, call me ther bloomiest liar in these yere parts!"

The speaker was Culpepper Bob!

"We shall be sure to do something worse than that to you," declared the guarded voice of Easy Ned. "If you play us crooked, we'll fill you so full of lead that a balloon wouldn't float you!"

"Thet's ther kind o' pards I like! No foolin' is a mighty good motter."

"Where is your man who was to lead us to the retreat of Captain Blood?"

Bob gave a low, peculiar whistle.

"He's on hand."

Apparently from out of the ground, a dark figure seemed to rise up in the very midst of them.

"Injun Jim is here!"

It was the half-blood!

After a few moments more of low conversation the men followed the red-skin, who took the lead without hesitation. Straight to the mouth of the Gloriana Mine he went, taking care to come up behind the buildings.

"Two men are on guard," he explained. "Jim will have to give them the signal and knock them over. Otherwise they would give the signal, and the double-face would expect us. Then he would fight like a cornered tiger."

Jim boldly advanced. He was soon challenged, but he retorted readily. Then he went on toward the dark mouth of the mine.

At the same time there was a whispered expression of wonderment among the men behind the buildings. They could not understand why they had been brought to the Gloriana Mine, but Easy Ned assured them everything was all right.

After a short space of time, the half-blood returned.

"All is well," he said. "Follow."

"Hev yer fixed ther guards?" anxiously asked Culpepper Bob.

"They are quieted," was the significant reply.

They followed him into the dark mouth of the shaft, passing two silent bodies which lay close by some rocks. Cautiously they descended the slope till a low hiss brought them to a halt in the blank darkness.

"Give one light," softly commanded the voice of Injun Jim. "Must see some where to go."

A single torch was lighted, and then they went on again. They could see very little of their surroundings, but the most of them knew they passed through the portion of the mine that was being worked regularly and, by means of a narrow passage, entered a section that was supposed to be abandoned.

On they went until they were deep down in the distance. In an instant, the torch was extinguished. Still they crept cautiously forward.

Before long, they found themselves looking into a chamber where a singular scene was being enacted. In the crevices around the stony walls were thrust a score of lighted torches, which illumined the place, casting a fitful, uncertain glare over the forms of a dozen masked men.

There was one who did not wear a mask, and he was standing with his back to the rocky wall, boldly facing a man who held a cocked revolver in his hand.

The unmasked one was recognized as Harold Dustan, the foreman of the mine!

The mask lifted his arm and took deliberate aim at Harold's heart. Then followed the loud report of a pistol!

CHAPTER XVI.

UNMASKED.

It was not Captain Blood who fired, for the weapon fell from his fingers and his arm dropped helplessly by his side, shattered by a bullet.

Into the lighted chamber poured the men from Early Bird, taking the outlaws completely by surprise.

Injun Jim rushed furiously upon the leader of the masks, screaming wildly:

"Death to the double-face! Death to the slayer of the Red Rose!"

A savage but brief battle took place within the chamber, but, taken by surprise as they were, the masks were soon overcome, killed, wounded or captured.

Captain Blood fought fiercely for his life, injured though he was, for he saw no mercy in the eyes of the half-blood. However, he was no match for the enraged Indian, who drove a knife into the neck of the counterfeiter chief, just as Culpepper Bob tried to tear them apart.

"Jim's work is done!" cried the half-blood. "The Red Rose will now rest easy in her grave!"

"And you have robbed me of the very man I was after, Jim," declared the man from Cut-throat Bend, after tearing the mask from the face of the fallen chief and revealing the features of Major Selban Hunter. "He has played a shrewd double game in Early Bird, but death has cashed his checks."

Hunter was not quite dead. He opened his eyes and faintly gurgled:

"Knew it—all the time. Tried to—fool you—same as others. Wanted you to—think me—your—friend till I could—get you—into—trap. Wanted to—be sure—you were—"

The terrible rattle sounded in his throat, and he fell back dead! Never-sleeping Justice had brought him to his merited deserts at last, and his career of infamy and crime was closed.

"Who in blazes are you?" demanded Easy Ned, of Culpepper Bob, for he had detected a change in the red-head's speech and manner. "With Major Hunter turned out to be Captain Blood, you may prove to be—"

"Secret Service Sam, at your service!" bowed the other, as he deftly removed his disguise. "I originally played the part of Stuttering Sile, on appearing in Early Bird, but Dapper Davy's exposure made it necessary for me to assume another role—hence Culpepper Bob appeared."

"Curse you!" screamed a shrill voice, as one of the masks, who had fallen early in the struggle, arose upon an elbow, tearing away the face-covering. "You have hounded me down, at last, Sam Sheridan!"

"Delva Murella!" exclaimed the detective.

"Dapper Davy!" chorused the others.

"I am both!" was the amazing assertion. "I have played both parts so skillfully that none suspected! If this cursed detective had left me in peace, all would have been well! I failed once in ending his life; but this time I will not fail!"

The desperate woman lifted a revolver, but, like a flash, Injun Jim leaped forward and, with a skillful kick, sent the weapon flying from her hand.

She fell back, a cry of fury and pain escaping her white lips.

Sam was quickly bending over her.

"So you were really Dapper Davy?" he asked. "I more than half suspected it, for I noticed the little sport always kept his hands gloved, and I knew nothing of your having a brother. Your life of wickedness has brought you here. Where are you wounded?"

"It can make no difference to you," she faintly replied. "I feel that my life is slipping away, and the end is close at hand. I would not care so very much, if you were dead, for there has been little joy in life for me since—"

"Since you foully murdered Dallas Sheridan!"

"Yes, I have kept his child—I know not why. Harvey Klaw did not know the truth—he thought Dapper Davy was a man—he thought Davy wished to make the girl his wife. Only Casper Feldan knew all."

"Who is Casper Feldan?"

"He was Captain Blood."

"What was the connection between you and him?"

"I became his wife three years ago."

"But you seemed arrayed against him in Early Bird."

"That was part of our game."

"And do you know nothing of Vira—of her fate? Was she really kidnapped?"

"I would not answer, only I know you will find her. She ran away from Klaw, but, at my command, when she was found, she was brought here to the mine. An hour ago I quarreled with Casper, for I learned he had been making love to her in the cell where she is confined."

"Did the dog do her any insult or harm?" hotly demanded the Secret Service Detective.

"No; though he might, had not Harold Dustan possessed a derringer, with the single shot of which he wounded my husband slightly."

"Thank God for that!"

By this time, Harold had been released from his iron fetters, and he immediately led a party in search for Vira. Sam Sheridan was eager to see the daughter of his dead brother, and so he deserted the Woman of the Crimson Hands for a time.

Vira was found, although she was nearly prostrated with grief and horror. Her delight and amazement can be better imagined than described. It was only thought best to tell her that Sam Sheridan was her uncle; other information and explanations were reserved for another time.

When the party returned to the chamber where the battle had taken place, it was found that Delva Murella had expired during their absence.

It is not necessary to tell the reader of the punishment that overtook the captured outlaws and counterfeiter. They fell into the hands of Western men who believed in meting out justice swiftly and surely, and not one of them escaped.

In the abandoned portion of the Gloriana Mine were found all the utensils with which Captain Blood carried on his unlawful business. As Major Hunter he had worked the worn-out mine, even though the ore did not make a paying re-

turn, and he had steadily refused to sell the property. The working of the mine was a shrewd ruse which concealed the true business that was being carried on down there under the ground.

Among Hunter's men were several who were honest and who knew nothing of the illegal proceedings of their employer. It was the counterfeiter's idea to have an honest foreman, but it was necessary to have one who knew so little about the business that he would not "smell a rat." Thus it happened that Harold Dustan was employed.

But Harold never regretted fortune had brought him to Early Bird, for there he found Vira, who afterward became his wife.

Easy Ned Lester was also an open suitor for Vira's hand, but he took his defeat like a man.

"I don't know of another man in all the world I had rather see win her—myself excepted," he frankly said, as he took Harold's hand and expressed his congratulations. "I am willing to admit you may be the better man of us two, for I have been a sporting character, although I have forsworn such a life from this on. I mean to go into business of some square sort and see if I cannot be a man."

"Good for you!" retorted Harold. "I like the sound of that, and I shall pick you for a winner in the game of life."

In after years, Ned indeed became "a winner." Hunk Riley, Eben Sutton, Sassafras Jack and others of their ilk pursued the course they had chosen, nearly all of them meeting violent deaths.

Delva Murella and her husband rest side by side in the dark depths of the deserted Gloriana Mine, their cupidity and scheming forever ended.

Injun Jim disappeared on the night of the raid, his work of vengeance being ended, and I am unable to say what became of him.

Sam Sheridan had been detached to break up "Captain Blood's" band of coiners and bring the chief to justice, if possible. He did not succeed in putting the irons on the foxy manufacturer of the "queer," but he did break up the band for all time, for which service he was highly commended and remunerated.

He is still in the Government employ, and the name of Secret Service Sam is a terror to evil-doers.

THE END.

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